



**What can the School Governing Body do to improve school performance  
without interfering with management?**

**Nick Taylor, JET Education Services**

**Presentation to Governing Body Foundation**

*5 May 2009*

I want to make three points with respect to our topic this morning. First, taking an active interest in the performance of the school it governs is a most important priority for any School Governing Body. Second, this is a tricky question, given the relationships established by law between the principal and his/her governing body with respect to the curriculum. However, and this is the third and central focus of my address this morning, there are many opportunities for school governors to influence and monitor the academic performance of the school.

## **1. The need to focus on quality at all levels**

First, the question posed by our topic is of great pertinence to all schools in South Africa. It has become well known that the performance of the majority of the country's schools is well below par, even compared with much poorer countries in Africa. Given our expenditure on education, performance should be very much higher. What is not quite as well known is that underperformance and poor quality occur at every level of the school system, and in all sectors of the population. I think many relatively affluent parents are under the impression that their children receive a world class standard of schooling in many suburban state schools throughout the country. Well, although we certainly can boast a number of schools able to compete with the best, the evidence would indicate that, in general, this complacency is not well founded.

In Figure 1, for example, we see the Grade 6 maths scores for 14 Southern and Eastern African countries participating in the 2000 SACMEQ<sup>1</sup> testing programme. In terms of mean country scores, South Africa is placed ninth, behind neighbours Botswana, Swaziland and Mozambique, all three East African countries Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda, and the two Indian Ocean island states of Mauritius and the Seychelles. What is equally disturbing is that this relatively poor performance occurs at all socio-economic levels, including the richest public schools. It is true that our richest quintile of schools is ranked third in Grade 6 math performance, but we are placed behind Kenya, a country with a per capita GDP one-fifth that of South Africa's.

---

<sup>1</sup> The Southern and Eastern African Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality, an initiative of UNESCO and administered by the Institute for Educational Planning, Paris.

**Figure 1: SACMEQ mean maths score by quintile** *vd Berg & Louw, 2006*

Quintile	1	2	3	4	5	Mean
Botswana	491	499	510	508	557	513
Kenya	540	545	555	565	611	563
Lesotho	443	448	448	445	452	447
Malawi	422	427	435	433	447	433
Mauritius	519	564	587	620	640	584
Mozambique	526	525	531	530	538	530
Namibia	403	402	411	425	513	431
Seychelles	520	541	555	576	579	544
South Africa	442	445	454	491	597	486
Swaziland	506	511	511	513	541	517
Tanzania	484	511	529	528	560	522
Uganda	484	497	498	509	543	506
Zambia	414	425	436	434	466	435
Zanzibar	478	472	478	479	484	478
Mean	468	480	485	492	560	468

Similar results confirm the picture of an underperforming system in all the other international comparative testing programmes in which South Africa participates. In the 2006 application of the PIRLS<sup>2</sup> literacy tests for Grade 4 learners, our mean score was half that of the international mean, and well below those for other developing countries in the sample.

**Table 1: South Africa's PIRLS mean scores compared with those of selected countries**

	G4
Singapore	558
International mean	500
Trinidad & Tobago	436
Kuwait	330
Morocco	323
South Africa	253

Source: Howie, *et al* 2007

The poor scores in primary school maths and literacy are mirrored in our high school maths and science scores. The TIMSS<sup>3</sup> scores for 1995, 1999 and 2003 indicate that, not only are we the lowest performing developing country in the sample, but that our scores have remained unchanged over this eight year period (Table 2).

<sup>2</sup> Progress in International Reading Literacy Study, run under the auspices of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), based at Boston College, Boston.

<sup>3</sup> Trends in International Maths and Science Studies, also run by the IEA.

**Table 2: TIMSS scores 1995, 1999 and 2003**

Country	GNP (USD)	Education spend (% of GNP)	Average scale scores					
			Mathematics			Science		
			1995	1999	2003	1995	1999	2003
<b>Singapore</b>	32810	3.0	609	604	605	580	568	578
<b>Int average</b>			519	521	467	518	521	474
<b>Tunisia</b>	2110	7.7		448	410		430	404
<b>Chile</b>	4820	3.6		392	387		420	413
<b>Morocco</b>	1260	5.3		337	387		323	396
<b>Botswana</b>					366			365
<b>Ghana</b>					276			255
<b>SA</b>	3210	8.0	278	275	264	263	243	244

Source: Howie (2001), Reddy (2006)

The PIRLS framework is particularly illuminating, because the reading benchmarks which comprise the framework describe progressively higher levels of reading proficiency. Furthermore, the ladder of reading ability shown in Table 3 coincides with a hierarchy of increasingly complex cognitive processes. Thus, extracting information stated explicitly in a given text (Low reading benchmark) is easier to do than to make inferences about given information (Intermediate benchmark), which in turn is easier than justifying an interpretation of a text, using evidence from the text (High benchmark), and the most challenging task is to integrate information across different texts (Advanced benchmark).

**Table 3: PIRLS Benchmark scores**

PIRLS Benchmark	Score	Reading Skills	Intl median	SA G4
Advanced	625+	<b>Advanced readers.</b> Learners are able to <i>integrate information across relatively challenging texts</i> and can provide full text-based support in their answers. Learners are able to make interpretations and can demonstrate that they understand the function of organizational features in texts.	7%	SA 1% 1% A 3% E
High	550-625	<b>Competent readers.</b> Learners exhibit the ability to retrieve significant details embedded across the text, to <i>provide text-based support for inferences</i> , and to recognise main ideas, some textual features and elements and are able to begin to integrate ideas and information across texts.	41%	SA 3% 8% A 10% E
Intermediate	475-549	<b>Some reading proficiency.</b> With regards to reading stories, learners are able to understand the plot at a literal level and to <i>make some inferences</i> and connections across texts.	76%	SA 7% A 22% E 23%
Low	400 - 474	<b>Basic reading skills.</b> Learners able to recognise, locate and <i>reproduce information that is explicitly stated in texts</i> , and make straightforward inferences.	94%	SA 13% A 37% E 36%

A, E: scores of children who took the test in Afrikaans and English, respectively.

Source: Howie, *et al* 2007

The second column from the right in Table 3 shows the median percentage of children internationally achieving the respective benchmarks. The far right column shows that South African children on average (SA) are well behind the international median at all benchmark levels. Children were required to write the test in the language in which they had received instruction in the first 4 years of schooling, and the performance of children who took the test in English (E) and Afrikaans (A) therefore gives a good indication of the top end of the South African spectrum: here the results are also discouraging when compared with the international median.

Tests such as PIRLS rarely assess extended writing ability, because of the practical difficulties of doing that on any scale. However, it is well known that *producing* a text at any given level of complexity is more challenging still than *recognising* or interpreting the same kind of text, indicating that writing complex texts represents the highest level of cognitive challenge. The point I am making here is that reading and writing lie at the heart of learning, of developing the ability to understand ideas at different levels of cognitive complexity, and to express such ideas verbally or in writing. Indeed, I would go so far as to say that schooling is about reading and writing at progressively more complex levels and in an increasing number of specialist subject areas (literature, history, mathematics). As learners encounter increasingly complex vocabulary, grammatical structures and ideas, all of which are best exercised through written text, their language abilities develop and so do their cognitive capacities. The core business of schools is intellectual development, and I have argued that intellectual development is essentially powered by reading and writing. And the international tests tell us that South African children of all ages and social backgrounds are not doing nearly enough of it, and what we do is generally of too low a level. This conclusion gives a very clear message to School Governing Bodies (SGBs) and School Management Teams (SMTs) alike: promote a reading and writing culture in our schools of a far greater intensity and depth than the culture we are maintaining at present.

## **2. The relationship between governance and management**

Which brings us to my second point: what is the proper role of the SGB in curricular matters? Well, the situation is complicated by the provisions of the SA Schools Act, which clearly gives the greater authority, correctly in my view, to the principal on curriculum matters. On the other hand, the Act specifies that the governing body ‘... *must* promote the best interests of the school and strive to ensure its development through the provision of quality education for all learners at the school’.

Under the legal framework pertaining in SA public schools, the SGB has no option but to work in partnership with the principal and his/her management team on improving academic performance, and in any case this is by far the more productive relationship between the governors and managers in any organisation.

## **3. Ways for the SGB to get involved in educational quality**

Indeed, the SA Schools Act provides plenty of scope for a partnership between the SGB and SMT on curricular matters, including the one I have identified as a key priority: promoting higher levels of

proficiency in reading and writing. I want to suggest that there are three main mechanisms at the disposal of the SGB through which this aim can be achieved.

### **3.1 The Academic Performance Improvement Plan**

First, there is what the SA Schools Act, as amended in December 2007, calls the Academic Performance Improvement Plan (APIP). The Act requires the principal to:

- Formulate an improvement plan, which must be submitted to and approved by the provincial Head of Department and tabled at an SGB meeting, and
- Report on progress made in implementing the plan by 30 June to both the HOD and the SGB.

The APIP therefore provides the ideal mechanism for improving academic performance, and for the focal point for cooperation between the SGB and SMT. It should be very clear from my argument so far that the APIP should have as its central focus the improvement of reading and writing: children should be reading and writing every day in every subject. In languages and the content subjects they should write at least one extended passage a week, because it is through describing the world in detail, expressing their feeling and opinions at length and analysing ideas in depth that the higher cognitive functions are developed. In maths and the sciences writing should also happen every day, and a good deal of this should consist of solving relatively complex problems involving a number of steps and utilising inferential and deductive reasoning to solve non-standard problems.

A common response of teachers to these suggestions is that they couldn't set so much writing for their learners because they, the teachers, couldn't possibly mark it all. Well, feedback to children about their writing is most important in promoting learning, but teachers certainly don't have to assess in detail everything their learners write. They could mark a sample of work every week, they could mark parts of a written exercise, they could ask one learner to read out her written piece as a way of starting a discussion on a topic, or employ a host of other strategies. Yes, learners' work should be assessed systematically and as frequently as possible, but it is far more important for learners to write every day than it is for teachers to mark every bit of written work produced.

Another thing about learners' writing is that it provides the most effective indicator for monitoring the quality of teaching and learning. In my view, monitoring is not about checking compliance with policy but about identifying areas, in the work of both teachers and learners, which require further development. And I believe that checking teacher work schedules, lesson plans and the voluminous assessment records demanded by provincial departments can all too easily reflect good intentions and rose coloured reconstructions rather than the substance of learner achievement. Indeed, the easiest way of getting to the substance of what learners can do is to look at the written work they undertake daily in class. And here too, Heads of Departments (HODs) don't have to check every learner's book: a random sample of two or three books drawn once a month is the very best barometer for what actually happens in the class from day to day.

A final point about the APIP is that, given our isolation for so many decades from international standards and the insidious effect this has had on the quality of schooling even in many of our best schools, SGBs may want to investigate ways of subscribing to external testing programmes. This could be implemented at key points in the system – say Grades 3, 6, 9 and 10 – and be implemented annually. A number of agencies, including my own organisation, offer this service. Of the 9

provincial education departments, only the Western Cape Education Department (WCED) administers regular tests at levels other than Grade 12. The WCED has made very important progress in this area, but these are common denominator tests which don't push the upper end of the standards envelope. Our top schools need tests which not only stretch the most able students, but also identify those who require remedial instruction in reading and writing, of whom there is an increasing number in suburban schools.

### **3.2 The purchase and management of books**

It goes without saying that children cannot read without books, and I am very concerned about the 'worksheet disease' that seems to have permeated our schools in the last few years: we hardly ever see textbooks now in most subjects, and what little textual material the children see is mainly in the form of worksheets. The aversion by South African educators to textbooks is a huge problem, because a good textbook contains, in a single source, a comprehensive study programme for the year: it lays the whole curriculum out systematically, providing expositions of the concepts, definitions of the terms and symbols of the subject in question, worked examples of standard and non-standard problems, lots of graded exercises, and answers. There certainly are examples of bad textbooks in the country, but there are many good textbooks, and these provide the single most valuable teaching and learning resource. In the absence of textbooks children only see fragments of the curriculum, presented through stand-alone worksheets or isolated, short exercises written on the board.

Not only should learners see and use textbooks every day in class, but they should be given the books to keep for the year so that they have access to the whole curriculum in an integrated form, and to which they can continually refer throughout the year. In this regard the SGB has an important role to play. As custodians of the budget, SGBs have plenty of leverage to promote the purchase of a good textbook for each child in each of the main subjects, and to oversee the efficient management of these key intellectual resources.

### **3.3 The selection and professional development of teachers**

Perhaps the most important function of the SGB is to recommend teachers for appointment. And here governors, and particularly governors acting in concert through an organisation such as the Governing Body Foundation, can make a very important contribution, not only in their own schools but in drawing attention to a key principle which should be applicable throughout the system. A growing problem in our school system is the very poor knowledge on the part of teachers of the subjects they are supposed to be teaching. Again let me emphasise that there are many excellent teachers in our schools who pursue knowledge with a passion, but unfortunately such teachers are in a small minority in the majority of South African schools.

My organisation manages many teacher development programmes, and whenever we commence a training course for teachers we test their knowledge before the training starts in order to assess how to pitch the training, and then we test them again after training to assess their progress and the effectiveness of the programme. It is quite shocking to find that most teachers fail simple subject knowledge tests of the standard their learners are expected to master. This is a very hard fact to explain, and my current hypothesis is that teachers don't work at their subject knowledge

because they don't need to. Promotion throughout the civil service, and in the school system in particular, does not depend on expertise and knowledge, but on one or more of any number of nepotistic reasons, such as the union a teacher belongs to, which faction of a political party they support, whether they come from the same village as the principal, etc.

I want to suggest that we foreground the issue of subject knowledge in our selection and promotion of teachers. In my organisation we have found that interviews are a poor tool in selecting staff, but a written exercise which probes the knowledge and writing ability of applicants is most informative. Similarly, if we formally assess the subject knowledge of prospective teachers we will get a very good idea if they have the subject knowledge required to teach. Not only is this important in selecting knowledgeable teachers, but if a growing number of governing bodies adopt this approach, then we will begin to send an important signal about the importance of knowledge and expertise, in the face of the nepotistic practices currently rampant throughout the system.

Finally, it is clear that teachers in successful schools regularly work together in subject groups to discuss their own content knowledge and ways of teaching difficult topics. This goes by various names in the literature – communities of practice, continuing in-school professional development, take your pick. The important point is that, while in-service training programmes do play an important role in improving teacher knowledge and expertise, it is important for teachers to take charge of their own development; indeed, this is an important element of professional practice in any field. And here the SGB can also make a contribution, by encouraging and facilitating regular discussions by subject groups within the school, providing grants for subject experts from outside to run training programmes, for attendance at professional conferences, and the like.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In conclusion, it is all too easy for the country's best schools to bask in the glow of dozens of A symbols in the matric exam, but it is much more difficult to insist on setting a higher standard across the full range of performance. We need to stretch our students at all levels of academic performance, including the brightest and the best, who, in general, are performing far below their international counterparts. Yes, you will be accused of elitism, while the very politicians who make these accusations will send their own children to your schools. And I have suggested that achieving higher standards is not rocket science: what is required is a central focus on reading and writing at higher levels of cognitive challenge, and on regular frequent writing of extended passages in particular. I have proposed a number of ways in which this may be done, but the specifics will depend on conditions in each school, and any plan should be formulated in discussion between the SGB and SMT.

#### **References**

- Howie, S. (2001). **Mathematics and Science Performance in Grade 8 in South Africa 1998/1999**. Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council.
- Howie, S., Venter, E., van Staden, S., Zimmerman, L., Long, C., Scherman, V., Archer E. (2007). **PIRLS 2006 Summary Report: South African children's reading achievement**. Pretoria: University of Pretoria. Centre for Evaluation and Assessment.

Reddy, V. (2006). **Mathematics and Science Achievement at South African Schools in TIMSS 2003**. Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council.

Van der Berg, S. & Louw, M. (2006). **Unravelling the Mystery: Understanding South African Schooling Outcomes in Regional Context**. Paper to the conference of the Centre for the Study of African Economies, Oxford University.