

Learning Brief 1

December 2010



This is the first in a series of Learning Briefs published by JET Education Services. The Learning Briefs are meant to be read by education practitioners at the school, district, provincial and national levels. Ultimately, they are intended to disseminate new ideas, strategies and tools for improving the quality of education.

Learning Brief 1 aims to share observations and lessons from two pilot school improvement projects in the Eastern Cape and North West.

The two projects are being funded by Murray & Roberts, the D G Murray Trust, the Michael & Susan Dell Foundation and the JET Board of Directors. The North West and Eastern Cape Departments of Education helped to design the projects and are playing leading roles in their implementation.

Systemic School Improvement in Rural Areas: What have we learnt?

MANY small school improvement projects have been implemented in South Africa in recent years and hold valuable lessons for education practitioners. JET Education Services (JET) has evaluated many of these projects and implemented a number of larger ones.

Drawing on the knowledge accumulated from these projects, JET has designed a systemic school improvement model which is being piloted in two education circuits in the Eastern Cape and North West.

One of the aims of the model is to test how lessons from small-scale projects can be used to improve larger projects. Details indicating the scale of the two projects are given in Table 1.

Table 1 Scale of the two projects

Area	Schools	Teachers	Learners
Centres of Excellence Project (COEP), Eastern Cape	27	264	8 211
Bojanala Systemic School Improvement Project (BSSIP), North West	35	170	3 837
Total	62	434	12 048

The school improvement model has six main components, namely:

1. Mobilising stakeholders;
2. Improving school management;
3. Improving the performance of teachers;
4. Improving the involvement of parents;
5. Improving district operations; and
6. Improving teacher competence.

The process is supported by a seventh component, namely research and evaluation.

General project design

The model is based on the belief that successful school improvement requires partnerships among key stakeholders, namely district and circuit officials, school managers, teachers and their unions, parents and funders. It also reflects the view that sustainable education change requires:

- » **Effective strategies** for improving key areas of schooling;
- » **Effective mechanisms for** improving the **accountability** of school staff and other stakeholders;
- » **Effective district support** via visits to schools as well as training; and
- » **Adequate school resources** (as these are important but not essential for change).

A further understanding is that interventions have to be knowledge-based and evidence-led. Importantly, interventions are meant to support and not replace the district support and monitoring systems.

The model was specifically designed to enable districts, circuits and schools to apply it themselves. District officials in Cofimvaba in the Eastern Cape have endorsed its approach, to the point where they have begun to replicate it in other circuits not included in the Centres of Excellence Project (COEP).

» What have we learnt?

Thus far, we have learnt that:

- » **A single, integrated conceptual and strategic framework is vital for a district-based improvement project.** This framework provides all stakeholders with a common vision, direction and social contract. This helps to marshal district resources towards a common cause – an essential condition for any organisation to succeed.
- » **Every intervention should be comprehensive** and provide for strategy, accountability, support, training and resourcing. No single element is likely to change a system and different schools may have slightly different needs.
- » **Successful school improvement depends on the collection of information** that enables districts to adapt the intervention according to their specific needs.
- » **The adoption of common school management, teaching tools and instruments** by all schools in a district **helps to build confidence among managers and teaching staff.**

The following sections deal with the components of the model in greater detail.

COMPONENTS 1 & 4 Stakeholder and parent involvement

The principle behind these components is that educational improvement is best pursued through partnerships among the state/government, schools, communities and local authorities. These partnerships result in increased social investment in and resources allocated to teaching and learning.

The specific objectives of these components are to increase parents' participation in their children's schooling; mobilise additional resources for schools; and instil a strong sense of accountability in all stakeholders, thus ensuring that parents, in partnership with other community members, do what they can to assist learners.

While we acknowledge that this is easier said than done, community and parental support goes to the core of sustainable school change. In the COEP, community and parental involvement has resulted in a number of positive developments. Among other things:

- » Parents and learners established 25 home study groups in the five high schools in the cluster. Learners who did not study properly at home, because of a lack of resources or supervision, are now able to study in groups in homes with adequate lighting and other essential resources.
- » The study group concept has been adopted by the district and is being implemented in all of its 32 high schools. A total of 412 learners, mostly in Grade 12, are participating in 30 home study groups. They are supervised by parents who keep attendance registers and ensure that the children arrive safely back at their homes after the sessions. The parents periodically report on progress to guardian teachers at the schools.

Table 2 quantifies the gains brought about by study groups since the introduction of the concept in October 2009.

Table 2 Gains brought about by study groups

Activity	October 2009	September 2010
Study groups (project schools)	5	25
Evening study groups (all)	0	160
Learners involved	190	412
Hours per week per learner	1 hrs	15 hrs
Parents involved (all)	5	30



On average, learners have increased their study time from two to three hours a day. We estimate that learners are dedicating more than 250 additional hours (an equivalent of 25% of teaching time a year) to their learning activities.

In addition, study groups have invaluable social advantages. They take learners off the streets, instil a work ethic in learners and enhance parents' sense of self-worth in relation to their children's education.

» What have we learnt?

- » Parents are well aware of the challenges surrounding their children's education; however, they generally do not have the knowledge or the tools to intervene effectively. Since the formation of the study groups, even community elders have become involved, stepping in to support learners who don't have parents or guardians in their homes. This indicates that, **given the space and a voice, as well as clearly defined activities, parents and community contribute enthusiastically to their children's education.**
- » **The success of the study groups can be largely attributed to the vital role of principals and district officials** who are committed to finding innovative solutions to educational challenges. This includes encouraging disgruntled parents and community members and unmotivated learners to help improve the situation.
- » **Community participation in schooling should start at the school and spread outwards**, instead of starting in the community and working inwards. The conventional approach of starting in the community and working in towards the school is resource-intensive and less effective.
- » **Teachers themselves are appreciative** when learners put extra effort into their studies and parents actively support their children.
- » The successful replication of this programme **depends on identifying suitable community champions and securing the support of schools and the participation of community leaders.**

COMPONENT 2 School planning and organisation

This component is based on the finding that schools in South Africa do not efficiently utilise resources such as teaching time and books to improve the quality of teaching. Research conducted in schools that participated in the Khanyisa Education Improvement Project in 2006 showed that most schools planned to utilise only 32 of the prescribed 40 teaching weeks a year. This is a common first step to ineffective schooling.

An even greater cause for concern is the fact that, due to unofficial closures and poor timekeeping, the actual time used for teaching and learning is much less than 32 weeks. This contributes towards learners not completing their curricula.

The school self-evaluations conducted in the course of the two current projects have shown that most school managers do not know which aspects of schooling they need to monitor in order to improve the quality of teaching and learning in their schools. To address these challenges, project schools are being helped to implement school self-evaluation (SSE) processes.

Most schools do not gather information relating to curriculum delivery. Only three or fewer schools provided curriculum management information in response to 19 of the 20 curriculum-related questions in the SSE instrument. Only six out of ten schools could produce information about the 'average number of mathematics and language teachers who give learners at least one informal assessment per week'.

In a school effectiveness study conducted by JET in 2007 and 2009, 33% (71) of 216 primary schools in eight provinces had no information about teacher absenteeism. Even in the schools where registers were up to date, levels of absenteeism were high, indicating that the schools did not act upon the information they had collected. Other studies have confirmed that school management teams have little formal data about what happens in their schools.

Specifically, the statistics point to a need to improve the capacity of school principals and heads of departments to ensure that curricula are effectively taught and completed. Thus far the evidence suggests that school managers need to exercise greater control over curricula, gather information more systematically and use it to improve various aspects of their schools' performance.

School managers need to monitor key aspects of

Table 3 A typical school management dashboard (Grade 3 only)

Indicator	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
1. Pass rate per subject for Grade 3 (>50%)	40	60	50	76
2. Maths exercises for Grade 3	20	30	23	28
3. Learners writing at their correct level	51%	56%	60%	63%
4. Teachers submitting weekly teaching plans	0	5	9	16
5. Accumulated daily reading time by Grade 3 learners	0	16	16	16
6. Learners completing their homework (%)	15%	50%	47%	60%
7. Teachers submitting assessments for moderation	10	17	14	17
8. Stock register/inventory is always up to date	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
9. Number of teaching days lost per term	7	2	10	2
10. Average number of learners arriving late per day	103	50	80	23
11. Parents attending parents' meeting	14	50	30	150
12. Up-to-date financial records	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

schooling in order to benchmark and direct their school improvement processes. Schools need to agree on key indicators of success which all the key players (management, teachers, learners and parents) should monitor. This advice also applies to district officials.

In implementing this idea, JET has adopted a set of 47 indicators and helps school managers to maintain a school management dashboard. This works in a similar way to the gauges on the dashboard of a motor vehicle which provide information about the inputs (oil, water and fuel), processes (cooling system and power) and outputs (speed and balance), which the driver needs to control the car.

Table 3 shows a typical school management dashboard. It provides a quick indication of the health of a particular school. It shows that the performance of the school in question improved in the first and fourth quarters, but worsened during the third quarter. In this case, school managers would need to explain what happened and what needs to be improved.

» What have we learnt?

- » Merely collecting information will not improve the quality of learning and teaching in schools. However, **collecting and analysing information and using it to guide school managers and educators** will help to establish whether various aspects of schooling have improved and where more effort needs to be made.
- » **Performance indicators help school managers** to check their progress towards achieving agreed goals or conforming to agreed standards.

It is important to ensure that:

- » Most of the indicators are related to learning and teaching;
- » Indicators selected are measurable;
- » Information collected is verified; and
- » Management information derived from the SSE process is actively utilised to drive improvement through, for instance, presentations at staff meetings.

To minimise the administrative burden, information should be gathered on a quarterly basis using a random sample of grades and classes.

COMPONENTS 3 & 6

Improving teacher performance and competence

These components are aimed at improving three aspects of classroom practice: curriculum planning, curriculum delivery and learner assessment.

Common work schedules and learner assessments have been introduced in the project schools. Forty-three teachers – including some principals – willingly sat for rapid baseline assessment tests in mathematics, English language and physical science despite their natural anxiety over what the results might be. These tests have been assessed and profiles created for each teacher which will serve as a base for measuring their improvements in the course of the project.

» What have we learnt?

- » **Common work schedules enable subject advisors to monitor schools' curriculum delivery and to engage them in common learner assessments** which ensure that teachers standardise what learners learn from one school to the other and complete their curricula.
- » **Teachers are willing to transcend their entrenched resistance to assessments** if they are given an opportunity to agree to the assessment criteria. In the case of these projects, JET agreed to treat the results as confidential and to provide teachers with detailed individual feedback, advice and support.

COMPONENT 7

Research and evaluation

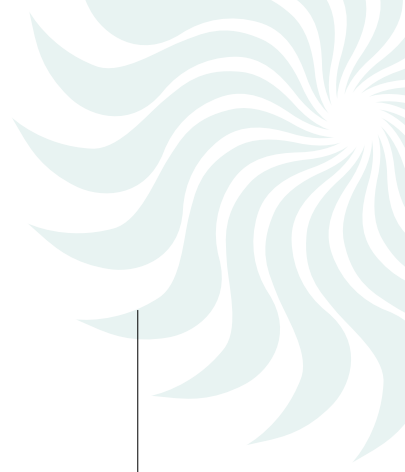
A COEP baseline study conducted at the beginning of 2009 provides interesting insights into teacher practices, qualifications and welfare, as well as learning outcomes. The data were collected from a sample of 8 211 learners and 148 teachers in 35 schools.

» What have we observed?

- » **Most teachers are well-qualified, but not in the subjects and phases they teach.** Only half the teachers teaching numeracy, language and science were trained in those subjects. On average, primary school teachers had taught for 20 years and secondary school teachers for 19 years. The teaching force is relatively old: 38% of teachers are 40–50. Only 6% are younger than 30, and 24% are older than 50. Fifty-five per cent of teachers said they did not feel confident about teaching the subject or subjects allocated to them. This suggests that schools and **district officials should gear their recruitment (and retention) strategies to younger people with qualifications in maths, science and languages.** Even more important, **education managers should allocate teachers to those subjects which they are capable of teaching.** Where possible, **recruitment and selection should be based on subject knowledge rather than qualifications.** For instance, instead of being asked generic questions in interviews, teachers applying for jobs should be asked to prepare and present lessons that will be assessed by the interview panel.
- » The **socio-economic circumstances** of teachers at schools involved in COEP **are not as bad as they are often made out to be.**
 - » On average, teachers spend 40% more on cars (R2 761 a month) than on mortgages (R1 917) and school fees (R1 515). Some 34% spend between R3 001 and R5 000 a month on cars.
 - » On average, teachers work 55 kilometres away from their homes. Those who rent accommodation work 31 kilometres from where they live. A third of the teachers use public transport to get to work and another 30% use their own cars. On average they spent R50 per week on transport to and from work.
 - » Some 80% of educators live with a family, which includes a spouse, children and other relatives. Only 15% live alone and 16% with one relative.
 - » Most teachers have easy access to amenities such as police stations (57%) and grocery shops (70%). However, only 29% have easy access to banks and 30% to hospitals.

SUMMARY OF KEY OBSERVATIONS AND LESSONS OUTLINED IN THE BRIEF

1. A single, integrated conceptual and strategic framework, which provides all stakeholders with a common vision, direction and social contract, is vital for a district-based improvement project. This helps to marshal district resources towards a common cause.
2. Every intervention towards school improvement should be comprehensive and provide for strategy, accountability, support, training and resourcing. No single element is likely to change a system because different schools may have different needs.
3. Successful school improvement depends on the collection of information that enables districts to adapt the intervention according to their specific needs.
4. The adoption of common school management and teaching tools and instruments by all schools in a district helps to build confidence among managers and teaching staff.
5. Given the space and a voice, as well as clearly defined activities, parents and community enthusiastically contribute to their children's education because they are well aware of the educational challenges in their children's schools.
6. A system of study groups take learners off the streets instils a work ethic in learners and enhances parents' sense of self-worth in relation to their children's education. Teachers themselves are appreciative when learners put extra effort into their studies and parents actively support their children.
7. Collecting and analysing information is vital for establishing performance indicators to help educators and school managers to check progress towards achieving agreed goals or conforming to agreed standards.
8. Common work schedules enable subject advisors to monitor schools' curriculum delivery and to engage them in common learner assessments which ensure that teachers standardise what learners learn from one school to the other and complete their curricula.
9. Teachers are willing to sit for knowledge assessments provided a commitment is made to deal with the data collected confidentially, to give detailed individual feedback and advice on improvement and to provide teacher support.
10. Where possible, recruitment and selection and allocation to teaching subjects should be based on subject knowledge rather than qualifications. Instead of asking generic questions in interviews, teachers applying for jobs should be invited to prepare and present lessons that get assessed by the interview panel.



DESIGN ASPECTS OF THE MODEL

	Stakeholder mobilisation	Planning and organisation	Teacher performance	Parent involvement	District support	Teacher competence	Research, M&E
Design components » Design elements »							
Frameworks/ Plan	Community and Circuit Education Charters to increase social and material resources in schools	School and Circuit Improvement plans based on key educational indicators	Common curriculum delivery plans, improved teaching and assessment practices	Parents' involvement programme outlining ways and tools of improving parents involvement	District Support and Monitoring Plan	Teacher Development Plan for the circuit based on teacher competency assessments	Annual research plan for the project
Accountability	Quarterly reports on the implementation of community support of schools	Schools perform Self-evaluation and districts carry out External evaluation (district and partners)	Quarterly learner assessments, SMT classroom visits and learning and teaching moderation; External assessments	Parents attend school meetings and monitor homework and study times	District management reviews focusing on the operations of the district	Personal staff development plans and follow-up teacher assessments	Adjunct project support function. Refer to components 2 and 5 for systems monitoring and evaluation functions
Support	Supporting communities and schools to develop charters and to engage in processes to raise additional social investment in education	School assisted to build SSE capacity and districts helped improve their monitoring capacity	Cluster training In-school support Reading Clubs (learners and teachers)	Structured parent programme, and advocacy and homework book	Collection of management information; Data analysis and planning (quarterly results, SSE, etc.)	Teacher development planning and content knowledge training focusing on areas of greatest need	
Training and mentorship	Training school staff on how to improve community involvement	Management development Self-Evaluation with emphasis on curriculum management	Classroom management; Pedagogy and assessment	Training schools staff on how to improve community involvement	Capacity improvement through involvement of district officials in the design and roll out of the project	Responsive subject knowledge training	
Resources	Development charter methodology and tools aimed at helping the communities increase investment in schools	Curriculum management frameworks, SSE instruments and management dashboards	Lesson plans; Assessment resource banks and work schedules	Parent involvement material	Full-time district project facilitator	Choice of good quality textbook	



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