

# Under strong leadership any school can succeed

Even teachers and principals in schools with limited or no resources can still make their mark on their pupils, writes **Graeme Bloch**

**M**ANY schools in the worst areas are doing really well. How do they do it without resources?

The answer is, mostly, management and leadership – usually a principal, who gets all the teachers on board, and who convinces the kids it is up to them to do well. Fixing our schools is partly a matter of getting the top right.

Of course, good principals should get the resources – but it's only in the classroom, where learner meets teacher, that the real adjustment to individual talents can be done.

The issue is: can the kids perform – and what are the outcomes? These are the basic teacher goals; no wonder the department stresses basic foundations as core.

I believe these goals should be primarily academic.

Only one third of our kids can read or count, according to Grade 3 Annual National Assessments. So we are not getting it right. There is a huge dropout before matric, so we are not getting it right.

Just the other day, on the train, someone asked me about the Eastern Cape: there, teachers and the department are at war, so little can be done.

Teachers are key. A teacher is more than the magic that happens in a classroom; a teacher is police and social worker, health worker and counsellor, among many roles.

Classes are huge, infrastructure is often lacking (even a decent toilet to go to) and certainly not a staffroom.

So, it is clear there is a range of issues that need fixing: resources and poverty, first, then the teaching, then the officials.

But pulling it all together, giving leadership, is what really counts, despite everything.

That, and the sharing of views and insights among good leaders, to make sure that what is learned is sent to all the schools that have an interest, thus allowing peer-to-peer education to dominate the teacher-upgrading experience.

Of course, academics are not everything. For a job in later life, you need to be on time, and work hard. Attitude and citizenship count. Does the school produce people who care, who are worried about the issues in society and education?

So a good school first makes sure young people achieve, then makes sure they fit in and are part of the change the country needs.



#### VITAL ROLE

The future of our kids and our country depends on teachers, says the writer

PICTURE: DAVID RITCHIE

Values and attitudes are part of the leadership stuff the school focuses on, as well as their own leadership development. Academics comes first, then culture, sports, attitude ... these are all important, though academics is the first reason you go to school.

The leadership and teaching issues flow from here. There is a discussion we need to have, as a country: what is a good school; what is achievement?

But while this is happening, we need to make sure our schools work and are managed properly.

We need to make sure our teachers are able to do what they need to do in the classroom, and that the district official helps rather than just adds to classroom burdens.

I would like to see more hands-on, more MEC- and official involvement, beyond compliance and paperwork.

In the meanwhile, it is up to heads of schools to protect teachers from the department where needed, and to organise things so teachers can do their jobs.

While the curriculum changes and the retraining of teachers is a given, how often has this merely become an excuse for teachers not rising to their tasks?



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Yes, there is much to blame in the past, but no one elsewhere in a globalised and vicious world is feeling sorry for us or waiting for us to catch up.

We are unlikely to pay more to attract teachers; already, a large slice of the huge budget goes to salaries and administration. Performance pay is largely a thing only a few schools at most can afford.

So it has to be a case of "Inspired Teachers" rising up to be the front-line of liberation for our kids.

I think principals and teachers are key. There are 27 000 schools, so not every principal or teacher will be brilliant.

Soft calls for discipline may at times dominate over complex responses to gangs, bullying and violence issues. Easy answers may sometimes prevail over deep analysis and action. Unions may block meaningful action.

But the future of the country depends on teachers, indeed the future of the kids.

The heads of department, organised in School Management Teams, must prepare and plan an academic future for our kids. If education is indeed to be a way out of poverty, we need to show how. This is up to us, the schools, the teachers, and the principals.

Fixing schools depends on us all. It will not happen easily or overnight.

In the meanwhile, there is much that we all can do to ensure management and leadership and teaching where it really counts.

● Graeme Bloch is a visiting adjunct professor at the Wits School of Public and Development Management. This is an edited version of his address to the Inspired Teachers conference in Joburg today.

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