In this Issue

SM&L

A new minister and the state of public schooling

This issue contains a number of articles relating to the current state of public schooling in South Africa, including the first part of a two-part article on the final report of the Ministerial Committee appointed to make recommendations about the establishment of the National Education Evaluation and Development Unit (NEEDU). Included is SADTU's comment on the report. There is also an article by Managing Editor Alan Clarke on what he learned from recent visits to schools in rural Eastern Cape and Limpopo and the difficulties that confront those schools. These perspectives confirm the huge challenges that face schooling in this country. In a second article, Alan raises the question of the need for a GET examination, given the problems that some schools face when enrolling Grade 10 pupils who are ill-equipped for the more rigorous demands of the NSC. The current use of the CTAs as assessment instruments to moderate and monitor performance at the end of the GET band is clearly not working and something needs to be put in place to promote greater academic rigour and accountability in this phase of schooling.

With the new national and provincial cabinets in place, it is our hope that those cabinet ministers tasked with political responsibility for education will replace election rhetoric with the political will necessary to drive the implementation of projects and processes that are needed to improve the quality of teaching and learning in our public schools. We have included a brief profile of the new Minister of Basic Education, Angie Motshekga for the information of our readers. In an effort to get a clearer idea of the educational credentials of the new Minister we sent e-mails to all of our Gauteng subscribers. (We chose our Gauteng subscribers because prior to her appointment as Minister, Ms Motshekga served as the MEC for Education in Gauteng.) We had replies from about 10% of those whom we contacted but only one comment in response to our request - from Mac Redelinghuys. We have included this on the same page and thank him for being willing to share his experience of her with our readers.

Also included in this issue is a review of SIAT, an Australian-based international testing system which is being widely used in some provinces as a way of benchmarking and analysing pupil performance. You can read more about it on page 14.

As always, we have included something on leadership and management practice. Our article on Strategic Conversations provides some good advice and a useful framework for the kinds of discussions about teaching that principals should hold regularly with individual members of staff. They are the kinds of discussion that we would encourage because it is from these conversations that teachers grow as professionals - growth that leads to improved morale, better knowledge and greater skills - all of which benefit the children they teach – which, after all, is what education is all about.

Leadership
Strategic conversations about teaching and learning

Strategic conversations are targeted individualised interactions and are an effective means of engaging teachers in discussions about the quality of teaching and learning in their classrooms.

In an article in the February 2009 edition of *Principal Leadership*[1], Robyn Jackson provides sound advice on the kinds of conversations that principals should have with teachers if they are to help them to improve the quality of their teaching. He makes the point that for many principals the job seems to entail no more than what he calls the three Bs – butts, books and buses, meaning bums on seats, books in classrooms and school buses on time. Some of this may sound familiar to South African principals although Jackson lives in the USA. He suggests that although many principals may be keen to engage teachers in conversations about improving instruction, few have been taught how to hold these conversations in a way that is open, stress-free and meaningful.

Strategic Conversations

Strategic conversations are defined as a series of targeted, individualised interactions with teachers, designed to help them significantly improve their instruction. They are not forms of supervisory feedback and should not be confused with the kind of discussion that would normally follow a lesson visit. Rather, they are designed to help teachers to learn and grow professionally.

There are four kinds of strategic conversation, each with a different approach based on the profile of the teacher in terms of age, experience and expertise, as well as the teaching and learning environment in which the teacher operates. Essentially, strategic conversations are meant to support the phased professional growth of a teacher from beginner to consummate professional. The four approaches that Jackson identifies are: Directing, Coaching, Facilitating and Reflecting.

Four Approaches

Directing: This is essentially a one-way hierarchical conversation between a leader and a follower. Essentially, the leader tells the follower what should be done and how to do it. This approach works best when the follower is unsure of himself because of his lack of knowledge or skill, or if he lacks the commitment or will to do what is required of him. In the case of teachers, it is about the principal or a senior member of staff identifying the individual's strengths and weaknesses and then providing him with specific advice on the things that he needs to do to improve or address his shortcomings.

Coaching: This approach is less autocratic than directing and is aimed at providing advice and guidance on how best to improve knowledge and skills. The conversation is more of a two-way discussion, with the principal, as coach, working alongside the teacher, as player, in an effort to get the best out of her. The conversation involves discussions around the person's strengths and weaknesses and the approaches and strategy that are most likely to lead to improvement. There is an expectation that the teacher will take increasing control of her own development, working at the things she needs to improve to increase her competence.

Facilitating: This approach is more about the sharing of ideas than the giving of advice. Facilitation helps maintain focus and encourages exploration of approaches and an analysis of factors that mitigate success. A facilitator is more of a supporter than a coach, suggesting alternatives and encouraging thoughtful reflection by providing objective feedback about performance.

Reflecting: This is the approach of the so-called "critical friend". It is about listening attentively and about asking the difficult probing questions in a way that encourages deep reflection about why particular approaches are adopted and the nature of their impact. Critical to conversations of this kind is trust - that what is said will be taken seriously and that whatever is transacted remains confidential. It is a trust that one dare not compromise because it will be almost impossible to resurrect.

In determining which approach to use and in order to ensure that the strategic conversation achieves its purpose, Jackson suggests that as a school leader you need to do two things:

• Determine the goals – that is, what you hope to achieve from the outcomes

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• Identify the needs, will and skill of the teacher you plan to engage. This is to ensure that you use the most suitable approach.

Determining goals

Before you engage the teacher in a strategic conversation, it is essential that you are quite clear about what you are hoping to achieve. It is also important to remember that the goals you need to focus on are the school's goals. As leader, your role is to ensure that the work that each teacher does, contributes to the school achieving its goals. This, after all, is why they are employed. This, of course, presumes that the school's goals are explicit, that you know what they are and that you are supportive of them. If you do not have specific goals, especially as they relate to the work of teachers, then the place to start is an exercise which will clarify the school's goals and make them more specific. Examples of goals of this kind could be:

• to improve the Gr. 3 Literacy results by 10%

• to provide greater support for pupils who are second-language learners

• to make more productive use of lesson time

Knowing what the school's goals are and how they should affect the work of teachers helps bring focus to the conversation and also makes it easier to ensure that the conversation revolves around specific actions and behaviours, rather than around personalities. A focus on what should or should not happen reduces the likelihood of the teacher becoming defensive and/or antagonistic: a situation that should be avoided.

Once you are clear about the school's goals, you need consider how best to use each teacher in the attainment of these goals. This will affect decisions about such things as the grades, class groups and subjects that each teacher should teach, as well as how they should approach their work to ensure that they and the school make the best use of their professional knowledge and skills. This approach ensures that decisions made and actions taken can be justified in terms of the needs of the school and the competencies of the teacher. It also helps each teacher to have a greater understanding of his or her professional role and responsibilities in relation to the needs of the school.

Identifying needs, will and skill

Most often in South African schools, a new staff member is simply dropped into the vacant staffing hole left by the person he or she is replacing and hope that he or she will swim more than sink. At some schools there are formal mentoring programmes for new staff members but at most, there is nothing. Even those with effective mentoring programmes seldom take the trouble really to consider the talents, needs and skills of incoming members of staff. This may, to a large extent, be a consequence of the shortage of skilled and well-qualified teachers, but also has to do with the failure of school leadership teams to put in place the management systems necessary to support staff in their teaching.

Jackson makes suggestions about the kinds of questions that need to be posed in identifying the extent of a teacher's will and skill and notes that it is more important to look at what the teacher actually does, rather than what she says when answering the questions.

Questions to use to determine the teacher's "will" include:

• Does she behave as if she believes that all students can learn and does she hold high expectations for all students?

• Does he demonstrate a commitment to students' mental, physical and emotional welfare and do whatever it takes to ensure that all students are successful?

• Does she seek out and accept feedback?

Those to be used to determine "skill" include:

• Does the teacher have good knowledge of the subject and content area he teachers?

• Does she demonstrate an understanding of students' learning needs?

• Does he effectively manage student behaviour?

• Does she track student progress?

• Does he ensure that all students are learning?

Matching the conversation

Having determined the teacher's will, skill and needs, the next step is to match these to the strategic conversational approach that will work best for that particular teacher. Should it be a directive type of approach, as would apply to a beginner teacher or to a teacher who may be struggling to

manage his class? Should it be a coaching type of approach which works well for an inexperienced teacher with talent and commitment but who, perhaps, is too 'out of the box' in his approach? This is where the experience and skill of the principal comes into play. Like most skills, however, it improves and becomes easier with practice. Principals have an added responsibility in this regard when working with their senior members of staff. Strategic conversations need to be part of the dialogue that they have with their senior staff, not only because of their value, but also because they provide opportunities for the principal to model good practice. This approach will, in turn, encourage senior members of staff to hold similar discussions with more junior colleagues in a manner which is appropriate and effective. This not only helps grow the professional competence of teachers, but will also assist senior staff members in growing their own skills and experience in preparation for the time when they may have the opportunity to lead their own schools. ■

References

[1] Robyn R. Jackson, Strategic Conversations, Principal Leadership, February 2009. Principal Leadership is a publication of the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP)

The Editor, *SM&L*

Dear Alan

I had the privilege of meeting Ms Angie Motshekga under very trying circumstances at our school. I was highly impressed by her endearing personality and her understanding. She is caring and supportive. Much more than a highly placed political figure, she is an educationist at heart. She has been a blessing to education in Gauteng. She will continue to be a blessing to education in her new position.

I have the highest regard for her.

Best wishes

Mac Redelinghuys

Profile
Minister Angie Motshekga

Angie Motshekga, the new Minister of Basic Education, holds a BA (Education) and BEd from the University of the North and an MEd from the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits). Her experience as a teacher includes a spell teaching at Orlando High School in Soweto and she has also lectured at the Soweto College of Education and at Wits.
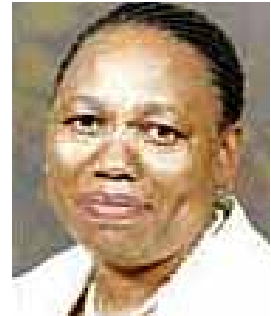
Minister of Basic Education, Angie Motshekga

Minister Motshekga was an executive member of the now defunct National Education Union of South Africa (Neusa) in the 1980s, where she gained experience in education policy development. During that time she was elected convenor of the teacher unity talks which led to the formation of the South African Democratic Teachers' Union (SADTU). Her interests, besides those in education, include women's development and language studies. She has published and conducted research in all three areas.

The Minister's involvement in government includes working as a convenor for gender in the Office of the President and as trainer in the Department of Public Service and Administration. She was elected a member of the Gauteng Provincial Legislature in 1999 and was appointed Chairperson of the Standing Committee on Education. In 2000 she was appointed MEC for Social Development and in April 2004 as MEC for Education in Gauteng.

In her profile published on the GDE website, she is described variously as having "a fiercely independent mind and shrewd intellect", as an "academic, politician, intellectual and shrewd thinker" and as having a "compassion for women's development". ■

News
Final NEEDU Report

The Final report of the Ministerial Committee on a National Education Evaluation and Development Unit (NEEDU) was released on 17 April. It provides important insites into the state of education in this country and suggestions on what needs to be done to improve the situation.

The Final report of the Ministerial Committee on the National Education Evaluation and Development Unit (NEEDU) is a substantial document which was released for public comment on 17 April. The importance of the report becomes more real if one accepts that the decision to establish such a unit has already been taken – this is acknowledged in the report – although this does not mean that the new government may not change its mind about this. We hope that this will not happen as we believe the need for such a unit is overdue. Because of this and because of the important insights that this report provides into the current state of schooling in this country, we have decided to provide a fairly full summary of the findings and recommendations of the committee. Although we dislike running an article over two issues, we have followed this course in this case because of its length.

Part 1: Research and findings

In the most recent edition of **SM&L** (Vol. 3 No.2) we reported on the DoE's media statement of 27 January 2009, indicating that the Minister had received the final report of the Ministerial Committee on a National Education Evaluation and Development Unit. This media statement also listed the five key findings of the report with the comment that "Minister Pandor will consider the recommendations of the final report of the Committee, in consultation with relevant stakeholders, and will make an announcement in this regard in the near future."

The final report was released for public comment as *General Notice No. 389* published in the *Government Gazette of 17 April 2009*. The closing date for public comment was given as 30 days from the publication of the Notice – i.e. 17 May.

The document makes fascinating reading and provides valuable insights into the current state of public schooling. It also provides evidence of the extent to which systems and processes put in place to evaluate and develop schools and teachers since the advent of a single unified public education system post 1994 have been (in)effective in doing so. The answer is that mostly they have not.

Review of National Policies

Part of the Committee's brief was that it should conduct a review of national policies, structures and processes of school evaluation. The review helps to provide a national perspective on the various initiatives that have been introduced over the years and their impact, if any, on the system. This section of the report focuses on the DoE's three main initiatives aimed at addressing the need for systems of appraisal, of evaluation and of development, namely the Development Appraisal System (DAS), the Whole School Evaluation Policy (WSE) and the Integrated Quality Management System (IQMS). As part of this review, the authors of the report have identified four sets of "tensions and inconsistencies" which they consider are partly responsible for the "unreliability of the IQMS results and outcomes[1]."

Four Tensions

The four tensions they have identified are:

• Educators' performance standards which do not focus on teaching and learning as crucial variables identified in the teacher effectiveness literature.

These variables include time on task, the appropriate use of textbooks and materials, good communication, motivation and the importance of positive feedback. The report notes that a related issue is that - in terms of educator performance standards - there is no direct focus on learner achievement data, and that "individual classroom observation or supervision was not agreed upon by SADTU".

• The kind of teacher accountability that the IQMS performance management process promotes.

It notes that "the major difficulty lies in the assumption that teachers are proactive professionals who are committed to improve their practices by using their professional reflexive competences". Most teachers and DSGs, according to the report, do not know how to conduct an effective analysis of teacher performance or how to prioritise their development needs. They have also not been given the high-quality training and opportunities necessary to meet these new expectations.

• The appropriateness of support available to teachers to improve their practice.

The tension in this instance revolves around blame, with provincial and district officials blaming problems on the poor attitudes of teachers, and teachers and schools blaming departmental officials for lack of support and poor quality training. Blame is also directed at the DoE for its failure to recognise the extent of the problem and the amount of support that would be needed.

• The conflation of appraisal for development and appraisal for performance measurement.

According to the report, once sanctions and rewards were linked to the performance appraisal, teachers became solely interested in these components of the appraisal system, trying to manipulate the system to qualify for pay increases and progression, with the result that their strengths, weaknesses and development needs were all but forgotten.

Other problem areas

Other problem areas included the fact that principals and district officials were often required to act as both the adjudicators in terms of performance and as mentors in terms of the provision of professional support for individual teachers; and that there was a lack of trust in the system.

From its analysis, the committee identified 8 factors which it considered would need to be taken into account if the new unit was to operate effectively. These include:

• the importance of evaluating or appraising work responsibilities that relate directly to the core function of the department and schools, namely teaching and learning;

• the need to appoint quality evaluators/ appraisers with a high level of professionalism and autonomy;

• the importance of separating organisationally the function of performance appraisal (that may be linked to sanction and reward) from development

appraisal aimed at professional growth and improvement. The recommendation is that these should be conducted by separate agencies.

• the necessity of developing an effective data management system to ensure that the different levels in the system (principals, district officials, etc.) can access the information for the purposes of school improvement.

Review of international literature on school evaluation and teacher appraisal

This is another interesting component of the report. It provides clear research-based guidelines about the approach and processes that have been used to achieve success in school evaluation, teacher appraisal and - most importantly - in improving student learning.

7 Key Questions

The committee sought answers to what it considered to be the 7 "key questions":

• *Internal or external evaluation?*

To answer this question they looked for the advantages and disadvantages of systems which used internal systems of evaluation rather like the IQMS vs. those which looked at external evaluators such as those used in WSE.

• *Evaluation of performance or evaluation for improvement?*

Systems which evaluate performance collect information about what has been achieved, while those that seek improvement identify "institution-specific priority problems" in an effort to assist schools to achieve their goals.

• *Evaluation for school support or performance monitoring?*

The research showed that high performing school systems split these two functions between two different authorities, with support provided at district level and monitoring carried out at national or provincial level. The research showed that where problems arose they

> "Some education systems, such as those of South Korea and Singapore, have focussed on these principles and turned their schools around in a remarkably short time; others have had little impact. Change is not, however, simply a matter of levels of investment in education. Singapore spent less on primary education than 27 of the 30 countries in the OECD states. The USA, by contrast, increased public spending per student by 73% after allowing for inflation and reduced class sizes substantially; yet here the reading scores of 9-year-olds, 13-year-olds and 17-year-olds remained the same in 2005 as they had been 25 years earlier."
>
> McKinsey & Company[1]
>
> (Extract from pp. 39 of the Final Report of the Ministerial Committee on a NEEDU)

related to the failure of the two components to co-ordinate their approaches and that this created confusion and resentment at school level.

• *Focus versus coverage?*

The consideration here is what exactly is to be evaluated. The report makes a clear statement in this regard:

"The international literature is also clear that school evaluation should not be cumbersome and time-consuming, but should focus directly on the essential factors that explain how and with what effect schools teach their students." They further note that:

"school improvement research shows that the core function of schooling – teaching and learning – needs to be the main focus of evaluation"

"effective school evaluations are those which encourage teachers to examine classroom practices and learner activities by having explicit evaluation questions about the link between teaching and learning"

"school evaluation should start with learners' achievement results and that teachers should use these as the basis from which to reflect on and assess what exactly in their teaching needs improvement in order to impact positively on academic results"

• *Expertise or inclusion?*

This question relates to the extent to which the evaluation should be carried out by expert professional evaluators from outside of the school or through the use of the school's teachers and district officials. The most successful systems apparently use a hybrid model with experts providing objectivity and rigour, thereby ensuring the resulting report has greater legitimacy and credibility than if the result were a product of internal evaluators who were part of the system. An example of a country which uses this model is England, where lessons are observed by either the principal or a senior member of staff, and an inspector, with the inspector focusing on the accuracy and quality of the observation recorded by the member of staff.

• *Accountability or support?*

According to the report, which refers to the work of Michael Fullen, a critical element of an improvement strategy is the right balance between accountability and support. Providing appropriate and timely support in the period following any monitoring or evaluation exercise plays an important part in persuading schools

Key factors for school improvement

Sammons

The 11 key factors which contribute most to school improvement and the achievement of learners, as identified by Sammons and his team.

1　Professional leadership: leading professional, participative approach, firm and purposeful.

2　Purposeful teaching: efficient organisation, structured lessons, adaptive practice, clarity.

3　Concentration on teaching and learning: maximising learning time, academic emphasis, focus on achievement.

4　Learning environment: an orderly and attractive working environment.

5　Shared vision and goals: unity of purpose, consistency of practice, collegiality and cooperation.

6　Positive reinforcement: clear and fair discipline and feedback.

7　High expectations (for all teachers and pupils): communicating expectations and providing intellectual challenge.

8　Pupil rights and expectations: raising learner self-esteem, positions of responsibility, control of work.

9　Monitoring progress: monitoring learner progress and evaluating school performance.

10　A learning organisation: school-based staff development.

11　Home-school partnerships: Parental involvement.

McKinsey

Three guiding principles on which to base change:

1　The quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers.

2　The only way to improve outcomes is to improve instruction.

3　Achieving universally high outcomes is possible by putting in place mechanisms to ensure that schools deliver high-quality instruction to every child.

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News
SADTU response to the NEEDU Report:
Top heavy on evaluation, light on development
Statement issued by the SADTU Secretariat, May 19 2009

Teachers and teacher unions have nothing to fear from the NEEDU (National Education Evaluation and Development Unit) Report. The proposals provide for an evaluation unit, whose main purpose is to undertake research and make recommendations to the Minister, and which would operate as a massive parastatal consultancy with little direct responsibility for practical implementation of anything.

Teachers and educationalists should however be concerned by the following:

- The proposed Unit adds yet another layer of bureaucracy for teachers and schools to cope with. Increased monitoring and inspections - if not linked to a positive programme of teacher development - will lead to further demoralisation of the profession;

- It represents a massive diversion of scarce educational resources - proposing an annual budget of close to half a billion rand and a high-calibre professional workforce approaching 1,000.

- The proposals take us back to the old forms of duplication, with multiple agencies evaluating the same things for different purposes.

- We also have to ask the question: Do the recommendations measure up to the task set by Polokwane Resolution number 32 - which called for: "The establishment of a national education evaluation and development unit for purposes of monitoring, evaluation and support." We would contend that there is little in the recommendations to take forward the quest for teacher development and support.

The report and proposal does not begin to address the underlying socio-economic conditions which fuel poor performance. The Report is concerned with measuring outputs, rather than improving inputs into the teaching and learning system. Our fear is that teachers will be cast as scapegoats once again.

Background

Clearly the main concern of the Report is with monitoring and evaluation to hold the teachers to account. Development must take place elsewhere. Not surprisingly, the NEEDU Committee is unable to fully comprehend the view from the side of the teachers, and the deep frustration felt by the failure to deliver teacher development in tandem with evaluation. This has a long history.

The Developmental Appraisal System (DAS), agreed by all parties to the ELRC (Education Labour Relations Council) some ten years ago, was premised on the acceptance that educators must be accountable for the quality of their work and should present themselves for regular appraisal. This was conceived as a developmental process: educators' weaknesses would be identified and addressed through mentoring and training. This made sense given the unequal and often inadequate nature of teacher training in the previous era.

The Department was unable to deliver on DAS, citing lack of resources.

The demise of DAS was also hastened by the import of new managerial notions of monitoring and evaluation, increasingly punitive and with minimal developmental content for teachers. Whole School Evaluation and later performance management were met with suspicion at best, and often outright resistance.

Next came IQMS (Integrated Quality Management System). As the name implied, IQMS sought to integrate the developmental aspects of DAS with the incentives-based model of the new managerialism.

Whilst the unions secured buy-in from the majority of members, many of the provincial departments of education were unable to deliver in terms of training and implementation of the new IQMS. Teacher development again fell by the wayside.

The NEEDU recommendations - largely based on the British model and reviled by teachers in the UK - continue to side-line teacher development, carrying on the tradition of the last ten years. There is no indication of how the work of NEEDU would contribute to development and support for teachers.

There is also an issue of process here. Any attempt to impose yet another inspection agency on teachers without their buy-in is likely to have limited positive impact.

On a positive note: the Teacher Development Summit at the end of June, planned by the

Opinion piece
Some thoughts on Rural Schools

Managing Editor Alan Clarke recently travelled to parts of the Eastern Cape and Limpopo on business and was able to visit a number of rural schools. He reflects on what he discovered and learned from these brief visits.

To understand some of the challenges facing schooling in this country, one needs to visit rural schools. I was fortunate during the course of March to have had the opportunity to talk to a number of principals and teachers who work in these schools as well as to visit some of them in their offices and classrooms. It is only when one visits these schools that one really understands just how isolated they are - not just in terms of the physical distance that separates them from urban centres and main roads. Also (and more importantly) they are isolated from the social, intellectual and economic hub which is part and parcel of the community life of those who live and work in our cities and larger towns. This has implications for the way in which they function.

Physically and Educationally Isolated

The principals and teachers at the rural schools that I visited mostly did not live within the community or local village in which their school was situated, choosing rather - for personal and family reasons - to live in the nearest town or urban centre. As a result, many needed to travel some distance on poor roads between their home and school each day. Although the distances and time spent travelling may be significant, these principals and teachers are probably no worse off in terms of travelling time than some of their city colleagues in the bigger urban centres. Pupils, too, may travel considerable distances between home and school each day and it was interesting to see five luxury buses parked outside one rural high school in the Maluti district of the Eastern Cape (near the Lesotho border),

waiting to collect pupils at the end of the school day. Because of the distance from the nearest town, these buses were used during the week solely for the purpose of transporting pupils. Having delivered the pupils at the start of the day, the buses and their drivers simply waited outside the school until the end of the school day to transport them home. One has to wonder about the cost to education of this exercise but with no regular form of public transport available, it is difficult to think what the alternatives are. In cities there are taxis, buses and trains and in the smaller towns most people who do not have their own transport travel by taxi; but in the deep rural areas taxis only serve the main routes and these do not necessarily go past schools. What is different in these areas is that teachers and pupils are almost the only people who travel back and forth in this way on a daily basis.

The ramifications and educational consequences of the isolation of these schools are considerable. Mostly the schools seem to operate only for the prescribed minimum-length school day. At the end of the day pupils want to get home and even if there are those that need to stay for extra lessons or for sport or for detention, missing the bus may mean a long walk home with no alternative transport available. Teachers also seem keen to get away from schools at the end of the day. Because most live in the nearest local town, lift clubs are popular – to remain at school either translates into inconvenience for the other members of the lift club or necessitates using one's own transport for that day - something many teachers are loath to do. Interestingly, in the past a number of these schools had hostels attached to them, although the hostel buildings of those I visited are now sadly rundown or in ruins as a result of the failure of the authorities and/or the local community to support and maintain them.

The isolation of these schools and transport-related problems also make it difficult to involve parents in the activities of the school and to involve them in the education of their children. This is exacerbated by the fact that the parents themselves are either unemployed, eking out a living as small-scale

The busses parked outside this rural school in the Maluti district of the Eastern Cape are used to transport pupils between home and school each day

farmers/ pastoralists living on communal land, or are working away from home. Many of these parents do not understand the need for school-going children to do homework and therefore there is no encouragement for them to do it.

Regrettably, these schools which have the greatest need for support from their districts and provincial offices appear to be left largely to their own devices. The problem once again probably relates to distance and time and the quality of the roads. Subject advisors and curriculum specialists seem reluctant to travel the distances needed to visit these schools – at least this is the impression that I have from my visits, my discussions with the teachers and from what I observed in terms of the state and use of facilities, and at the quality of work that I saw.

Influence of the Principal

What became increasingly obvious, particularly from what I encountered in the Eastern Cape, was the extent to which the quality of leadership and the commitment of the principal defined the quality of the school. While this simply confirms what research tells us about the quality of the principal and the quality of teaching and learning, it seemed to me that the quality of the principal as a determining factor has far greater impact in rural than in urban and city schools. There seems to be several reasons for this: the relative isolation of the school means it is less likely to face competition from other, better-performing schools; the fact that the majority of parents and community members have little understanding of the characteristics of good schools or of the opportunities that a "good" education can provide for their children; the relatively low expectations that these parents have of the school in terms of pupil performance in exit examinations; a lack of understanding of the work ethic and commitment

Principals do make a difference. This small primary school about 70km from Tzaneen had well tended gardens and was immaculately clean. Sadly this was not true for all schools I visited.

required from teachers and pupils if pupils are to succeed; and a failure of parents, SGBs and district officials to hold schools accountable for the poor performance of pupils.

In urban areas, parents who place value on the quality of their children's education quickly identify which the good schools are and make every effort to move their children to one of these better schools. As a result, the better schools are often oversubscribed and full to capacity, while poorly performing schools are faced with the flight of their better pupils and declining enrolments. Principals of these schools soon become aware, therefore, that their school is not seen as an attractive option. Declining pupil numbers mean a loss of teaching posts and possible investigation by officials from the local district office. The greater density of schools in urban areas also makes it easier to compare the results achieved by pupils Senior Certificate examinations and in the numeracy and literacy tests that constitute part of the national systemic evaluation. This kind of pressure to achieve is less likely in remote rural schools and as a result these principals are largely left to their own devices – either to exercise their leadership skills as drivers of quality or to become passive managers focused simply on meeting the minimum administrative requirements of the job.

Unfortunately the same seems to apply to district officials. How else can you explain a school that operated from January to August last year with an acting principal and 8 unfilled posts? Under these circumstances it is hardly surprising that the teachers at schools like these are demotivated, frequently absent and tardy in their approach to their work. It is also not surprising that the pupils who attend these schools perform poorly in externally set and assessed tests and examinations. Identifying these schools mostly takes no more than a 10-minute tour of the classrooms, offices and the school's site. They are characterised broken windows, dirty classrooms, cluttered offices and staff rooms, and neglected lawns and gardens. It is also not as if these schools do not have at least the basic facilities needed for education or a reasonable quality – that is if you are willing to exclude flushing toilets and the provision of water from rainwater tanks as opposed to piped municipal drinking water from your definition of basic facilities. The schools that I visited were housed in solid brick buildings and most had sufficient classrooms. Most but not all had electricity, computers for administrative use (although these were mostly not operating when I visited), Science laboratories of sorts equipped with science kits, and most also had a fully-equipped although not necessarily operational computer laboratory.

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The small generator in front of the administrative block of this rural Eastern Cape School is its only source of power.

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These schools need to be seen in stark contrast to the schools in similar contexts which are making a difference. Once again the difference is obvious from the moment you arrive: there are neat and well-maintained buildings and gardens, clean classrooms and an air of purpose. The difference is about people – the principal staff and teachers and their commitment to their pupils and it shows in the work that they do and the results that are achieved. If the powers that be in the DoE and PEDs want to tackle the problem of under-performing schools, their action needs to be directed at the level of the individual, starting with the principal. It is also probably necessary to bypass the district offices as in many cases these seem to be as inefficient and dysfunctional as the schools that they are meant to serve.

Intensive coaching and mentoring of principals would be a good place to start. This, together with regular close monitoring of key performance indicators, will help to keep improvement strategies on track. A web-based monitoring model using the cell-phone networks is one possible option, given the fact that many of these schools do not have functional Telkom landlines. This kind of a model would also make it possible to provide these schools with additional teaching and learning

The two small outhouses in the background are the staff toilets of this school. Virtually every rural school I visited had pit toilets of this kind. Interestingly most also had at least one computer.

resources to support teachers who are inexperienced, under-qualified or unsure about standards.

Whatever the system, something needs to be done because it is primarily at these schools that this country is failing its children. Let us hope that the new, incoming administration lives up to its promises and shows it has the political will to challenge the establishment and to make a difference in the places where it matters most. ■

Needu Report: Part 1

and teachers that the process is directed at school improvement rather than at checking that schools and teachers are doing their job. Critically, those involved in the monitoring process need to be able to demonstrate the link between the monitoring process, the improvement strategies and support, and the final benefits in terms of improved pupil performance.

• *Tradition or change?*

The literature suggests that changes to existing models of school evaluation are constrained by the history of these practices within each country. Generally, as would be expected, trade unions have traditionally resisted links between teacher evaluation and improvement. In most developed countries, teacher evaluation systems are designed mainly for accountability and promotion purposes and not linked to teacher improvement. In the UK and the Netherlands, teacher evaluation is the responsibility of the principal and school evaluation is the responsibility of the inspectorate.

The report goes on to list the 11 key factors identified by Sammons who was commissioned in 1995 to undertake a review of the literature on behalf of Ofsted[2], the body established to monitor school performance in England. It also lists the three "guiding principles on which to base change" identified in the 2007 McKinsey report. These lists are provided in boxes on page 7.

The second part of this article will be carried in the next issue of *SM&L*. ■

References and notes

[1] McKinsey & Company (2007). How the World's best-performing school systems came out on top.

[2] According to the report these were first identified by research on the IQMS implementation commissioned by the DoE with the title *Class Act, 2007*.

[3] Ofsted = Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills

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Research
What constitutes a failing school?

Research suggests that if nonschool factors are eliminated from methods used to evaluate school performance some surprising finding may emerge about which schools fare best in terms of the impact that they have on pupil learning.

Our public education system generally gets a bad press. Much is made of the fact that relative to most other countries (including our immediate neighbours), the academic performance of our pupils on international measures of literacy and numeracy is poor. Talk is of dysfunctional and failing schools.

In the USA there is legislation in place - the "No Child Left Behind Act" - which stipulates that schools be evaluated on an annual basis in terms of pupil performance in state-wide competency tests, which are designed to measure basic literacy and numeracy. Where the performance of pupils at a school is below the state-mandated minimum standard, schools are classified as "low performing" schools, or schools "in need of improvement". Generally, however, these schools are referred to as "failing schools" which the "No Child Left Behind Act" defines as "one that fails to make adequate yearly progress for two or more years in a row". These schools, together with their principals and staff, are then subject to special measures which are put in place in an attempt to remedy the situation. In some ways this is not too dissimilar from the situation that applies in this country to high schools which perform poorly in the National Senior Certificate examinations.

In a research-based article with the title "Are 'failing' schools really failing? Removing the influence of nonschool factors from measures of school quality"[1], and reported on in *Principal Leadership*[2], the authors look at ways of removing the nonschool factors from those that may influence pupil performance. To justify their approach, the authors make the point that a school-going American child spends 7 hours of an average 14-hour waking day (i.e. of the time that they are awake) at school for the 180-day school year. This translates into spending approximately 32% of their waking time attending school for the duration of the academic year and 25% for a calendar year. The point that the authors are trying to drive home is that pupils spend far more of their waking time out of school than they do in school, and that the nonschool factors which may influence a pupil's academic performance are therefore likely to have a greater influence than in-school factors. What the authors of the article tried to do with their research was to remove the effects of these factors from the measures that are used to determine pupil performance. By doing so, they hoped to measure the extent to which the school and teachers, rather than external factors such as poverty, ethnicity, race and the location of the school, were responsible for learning gains.

For their research, the authors used data from 309 schools in an Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Class of 1998 – 1999. Using an achievement-based evaluation model, the results showed a typical distribution of schools in terms of performance. Schools in the bottom quintile in terms of achievement were mostly public rather than independent, urban (inner city) rather than suburban or rural. The pupils attending these 'poorly' performing schools were also more than twice as likely to come from minority groups and to qualify for free lunch programmes – a measure of poverty.

The authors used two interesting approaches in their efforts to excise nonschool factors from the measures of schools' success. The first approach which they called "Learning-based evaluation" (as opposed to Achievement-based evaluation) in simple terms compared the academic progress (not

> "Based on these results, it is likely that many schools are mislabelled as "failing" by current state standards. In these mislabelled schools, teachers are improving their students' rates of learning (above that observed when the children are not in school) as much as, and sometimes more than, teachers serving advantaged students. And on the other end of the spectrum, some schools that currently serve students with high test scores, and so easily exceed the achievement model standards, may indeed be identified as having little or modest "impact" on their students under our evaluation technique."

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final attainment) of pupils over the course of the two years of kindergarten. This, to an extent, discounted the knowledge and skills base that pupils had when they first entered school but did not exclude the kind of support that children gained from their home and community environment during the course of the school year. The second model which they called "Impact-based assessment" used the fact that American schools have a long (2 months or more) summer vacation. The authors assumed that during this time pupils would continue to learn and develop cognitively but that this learning would be slower than it would be during the part of the year when pupils attended school. What the authors then did, in simple terms but using complex statistical techniques, was to measure the rate at which pupils learned during the course of the year, i.e. their rate of learning during the part of the year when they attended school and the rate of learning during the part of the year when there was no school. They then compared the changes in these rates of learning for the pupils attending each of the schools. Their hypothesis was that the most successful schools in terms of teaching and learning would be those in which the difference in learning gains of pupils was the greatest. This was based on the assumption that it was the influence of the school and teachers that produced the greater gains.

The results, as the authors report, were interesting and informative:

"The striking pattern that emerges from our results is that schools serving advantaged children (e.g. private versus public) are identified as attending much better schools under the achievement model, modestly better schools by the learning model, and comparable schools by the impact measure. This pattern of results suggests that, as we account for greater proportions of non-school factors, the advantages of private versus public schools become smaller, finally disappearing altogether. Based on these results, it is likely that many schools are mislabelled as "failing" by current state standards. In these mislabelled schools, teachers are improving their students' rates of learning (above that observed when the children are not in school) as much as, and sometimes more than, teachers serving advantaged students. And on the other end of the spectrum, some schools that currently serve students with high test scores, and so easily exceed the achievement model standards, may indeed be identified as having little or modest "impact" on their students under our evaluation technique."

One interesting point that the authors make about their report findings is that the schools serving advantaged children do not make more of a difference than those serving less advantaged children. One would expect these schools to do better because, besides the fact that they are serving more advantaged pupils, the schools are likely to have more experienced and better qualified teachers, smaller classes, newer textbooks as well as the other resources that are normally associated with advantage and better results. As the authors note, this finding raises further questions about those factors which do influence the quality of teaching and learning. Although the authors make some speculative suggestions about what these factors may be and about the reasons for the failure of better-resourced schools to make a greater impact, they are unable to provide any clear evidence in support of the factors that they identify.

The huge disparities within our South African school system and the consistently poor performance of the majority of pupils in most measures of academic achievement suggest a need for a measure of school performance similar to the "Impact-based evaluation" described here. A tool of this kind, which makes it possible to strip out the influence of socio-economic status and the availability of resources from measures used to evaluate schools, would make it possible for the Education Department to make more accurate judgements on which schools are - or are not - performing. One suspects that we are a long way from this ideal but that does not mean that we should not work towards establishing such a model in the future. It would certainly help make the debate about school quality more cogent. ■

References

[1] Downey, D.B., von Hippel, P.T., & Hughes, M. (2008). Are "failing" schools really failing? Removing the nonschool factors from measures of school quality. Sociology of Education, 81, 242 – 270.

[2] Bracey G.W. (2009). How do you define a failing school? Principal Leadership, February 2009 58 – 59.

Review
School International Assessment Test (SIAT)

Managing Editor Alan Clarke reviews the SIAT testing model and its potential value for schools.

The SIAT Tests are compiled and administered by the International Assessment Centre of the University of New South Wales, Australia and are marketed in South African by the Advtech group which includes the Abbotts and Crawford Colleges as part of their stable of independent schools. The tests are available for Grade 3 – 12 for Mathematics, Science and English and the questions used have been selected and adapted where necessary to ensure that they are aligned with the national curriculum statements for these subjects and grades.

The programme is not new to the country, having been used by range of independent and public schools for the past 8 years. Last year, the Gauteng PED tested a sample of 50 000 pupils across the province from Grade 3 to 11.

Cost varies, depending on the size of the school, starting from R65 per paper if the tests are written by every pupil. For a class or grade of 20 or more pupils, the price is R80 per paper and for individual candidates the cost is R110 per paper. These costs include VAT, courier costs for the delivery and collection of test papers, and the cost of the individual and group reports. The reports include international benchmarks based on the results from Australia and a sample of other Asia-Pacific countries.

Tests of this kind can be used by schools in a number of ways. The most obvious one is to use the test as an international benchmark for the academic performance of pupils. This is a useful exercise for schools which have pupils who perform at the top end of the academic spectrum nationally. UMALUSI has indicated in one of its reports[1] that the 2008 NSC Mathematics examination was not sufficiently challenging for pupils who scored between 80% and 100% and as a result did not discriminate between these top achievers. The use of the SIAT tests for this group would therefore provide a better indicator of the ability and also give a clearer idea their competence relative to their peers internationally. It is at these same schools that principals are often asked by parents about standards and about whether the results pupils score in the NSC examination are meaningful. Similarly, questions are asked about the extent to which the results are good predictors of success at tertiary level and whether they

International Competitions and Assessments for Schools
2008 English - Grade 10

The table below shows all questions. The questions answered incorrectly by IAN are shaded. Questions can be sorted by clicking on the table header. Click on the question to view it.

Question Number	Area Assessed	Question Description	Correct Answer	IAN's Answer	Region % correct
1	Reading - literary	Identify an object in a literary description by for	C	D	62
2	Reading - literary	Synthesise a paragraph in a literary description	B	✓	92
3	Reading - literary	Interpret the style of movement of creatures in	C	✓	75
4	Reading - literary	Interpret a figurative description of a character	B	✓	87
5	Reading - literary	Identify the location of a character in a literary	D	C	61
6	Textual devices	Identify an example of onomatopoeia in a liter	C	✓	81
7	Reading - factual	Interpret information in a text that describes a	B	D	82
8	Vocabulary	Interpret the meaning of a figurative expressio	D	A	55
9	Reading - factual	Infer the reason for including an expert's opini	D	B	33
10	Reading - factual	Interpret the reason for a specific language cho	A	B	36

Examples of some of the reports provided by SIAT

The top report is that of an individual pupil and provides detailed information about how he performed in each question and which area of the subject the question assessed. The bottom report provides similar detailed information on the performance of a class or grade group aiding the teacher in identifyiing which sections of work were well understood by the class and which they found difficult. The shaded blocks represent wrong answers and the unshaded blocks the correct answer.

	Question content	Area assessed	A	B	C	D	Non attempt
1	Convert a percentage to a decimal	Number & Arithmetic	62	12	19	8	0
2	Find the numerical probability of a single event occurring	Chance & Data	42	15	4	38	0
3	Order powers of integers	Number & Arithmetic	0	92	4	4	0
4	Modify a design to change its reflection symmetry	Space & Geometry	12	8	31	50	0
5	Convert revolutions to degrees	Measures & Units	0	0	12	85	4
6	Calculate a speed given distance and time	Measures & Units	4	0	92	4	0
7	Solve a word problem involving the four operations	Algebra & Patterns	0	88	12	0	0
8	Solve a volume problem by interpreting a diagram	Measures & Units	42	0	46	12	0
9	Identify a true inequality statement involving fractions	Number & Arithmetic	15	12	12	62	0

School percentage

are sufficient to meet the entry requirements for tertiary studies in the USA, Europe and other first-world countries. Testing pupils using the SIAT tests makes it possible for these schools to provide externally set, internationally benchmarked, hard evidence of their standards and of the achievement of individual pupils.

If cost were no object, it would be a relatively simple task to use SIAT to test every pupil every year. This would provide the school with an objective, ongoing measure of their academic standards and the quality of teaching and learning that the school provides. Another and less costly approach would be to test a random sample of, say, 20% of pupils each year from every grade or alternatively all the pupils from a specific grade. Both of these approaches could provide useful objective evidence of pupil performance to supplement the school's own assessment protocols and practices. Given the current uncertainties and public disquiet about educational standards, internationally benchmarked testing of this kind offers schools not only a valuable tool which they can use to measure their own performance but also a means to reassure parents and members of the public about standards at the schools. Added to this are the marketing opportunities that good performance can provide for schools that do well. ∎

Notes

[1] For more about the UMALUSI report "Can Higher Education Trust the 2008 NSC results?" see Vol. 3 No. 2 of *SM&L*.

Sadtu response to NEEDU Report

Department of Education, teacher unions and other major role players, provides the first real opportunity to address the teacher development deficit. The summit is being held with the express objective of "facilitating system-wide teacher development that will lead to sustainable improvement in the quality of teaching and learning in the classrooms and schools."

As SADTU we take the view that well-trained and motivated teachers are key to quality education. Evaluation and appraisal play an important role in improving school quality, but must work hand in hand with systems of teacher development and support.

SADTU is the largest union in the public service with 235,000 members and represents two-thirds of teachers. ∎

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