In this Issue

SM&L

Education Districts at Issue

In this issue we have turned our attention to the 82 Education Districts that are in place to serve and support the teachers and principals of this country's public schools. They have a critical responsibility in this regard and need to be held accountable for the schools in their care. But how does one measure the performance of an education district and how does one deal with districts which fail to provide the kinds of support that are so desperately needed by many of the schools that they have been established to serve?

Recent documents, included as annexures to written responses to parliamentary questions submitted to the Minister of Basic Education, have made it possible for us to analyse the performance of districts based on their results in the 2007 Senior Certificate and 2008 National Senior Certificate examinations. The annexures provided the SC/NSC results for all 82 Education Districts in the country for the years 2004 – 2008. Our analysis, which you can read about on pages 6 – 10, is most revealing and produces some interesting surprises.

This edition also includes an article on the characteristics and strategies of school districts in the USA which have been successful in supporting and turning around underperforming schools. We hope that these two articles will initiate debate and discussion about the role and responsibilities of Education Districts in this country and the kinds of things that they need to do to support under-performing schools. Expect further articles in the future on the important part that districts can and should be playing in supporting schools.

Two other articles which we hope you will find of interest relate to the principal's role in driving strategy and in monitoring teaching and learning. In "Leadership makes strategy work", we examine the vital role that principals play in ensuring that daily operational decisions support the school's strategic plan and move it closer to achieving its strategic goals. The article is based on material published in the Harvard Business Review. The other article, "Web-based walk throughs", looks at web-based models of data gathering and analysis that are being used by schools and school districts in the USA to collate data gleaned from classroom observation. Unlike the situation in this country, classroom visits by principals are a regular part of the school day in the USA. These visits are often for relatively short periods of time – hence the name "walk through" – but they happen frequently and include monitoring of specific practices. We wonder how well this kind of approach would be received in our public schools.

Also included in this issue is "Know what matters", the second article in our series on School Improvement Strategies and, as its title suggests, the article uses the findings from education research to identify and clarify the strategies and practices that have greatest influence on pupil performance.

We trust that you will enjoy the read.

P.O. Box 2612, CLAREINCH, 7740   Phone: 021 683 2899   Fax: 086 689 5971   Cell: 082 619 0719   E-mail: editor@ednews.co.za
www.ednews.co.za

1

Leadership
Good leaders makes strategy work

Good leadership is essential if strategic initiatives are to produce the institutional changes necessary to achieve your school's strategic goals.

The January 2008 edition of the *Harvard Business Review*[1] was devoted to the twin issues of Leadership and Strategy and - as would be expected from a Journal published by this prestigious management school - the authors of the articles included a number of the leading thinkers in these fields. One such person is Cynthia A. Montgomery[2], whose article, "Putting Leadership back into Strategy"[3], stresses the vital role that leaders play in ensuring that strategic initiative produces the kinds of changes that are needed if the organisation is to achieve its strategic goals.

Strategic planning is an important part of the renewal and reshaping process of any business or institution, such as a school, if it wishes to remain vibrant and relevant in the rapidly changing environment of today's world. Too often, however, the process becomes nothing more than a consultative paper exercise producing fine sounding words and phrases on posters and in PowerPoint presentations and perhaps a bit of rah-rah when an attempt is made to sell the proposals to all involved. Once done, the strategy becomes just more document gathering dust in the bottom drawer of the principal's desk. Montgomery suggests that one of the reasons for this is that, for big business at least, the strategic planning process has become so complex and theoretical that it has become an intellectual exercise and an end in itself, rather than an integral part of the daily operational processes of the organisation. The way to fix this problem (as she suggests in the title of her article) is to put "leadership back into strategy".

The point that Montgomery emphasises is that organisations are dynamic entities which must function in an environment that is constantly changing. She suggests that given this reality, it is illogical to treat strategy as a something fixed in time and that strategy should rather be seen as something that is equally dynamic. It is this fact that makes it imperative for the head of the organisation to assume responsibility for interpreting the strategy and for using it as a basis for daily dialogue and operational decision-making. Because of the dynamic nature of the environment in which organisations operate, it is difficult to devise a strategy which covers every detail and eventuality - which is why the role of the leader as interpreter of strategy is so important. As Montgomery eloquently puts it, "At heart, most strategies, like most people, involve some mystery. Interpreting that mystery is an abiding responsibility of the chief strategist, the CEO".

Continuing along this theme of the need for strategy to be flexible and the need for the head of the organisation to take the lead in interpreting how it should be applied, Montgomery stresses the point that good strategy does not necessarily need to be about making massive fundamental changes. Many great and enduring companies –such as Toyota and Nike - have achieved their long-term success by strategies which have focused on doing many small things better rather than re-inventing themselves. Others, however, such as Apple Computers, reached a point of becoming almost irrelevant before re-creating themselves as something new and distinctive to become leaders in a very different industry. In the case of Apple Computers, the change was from a specialist computer manufacturing company selling personal computers for a particular market segment, to an organisation producing and selling a wide range of visually appealing branded electronic products. This change is best symbolised by its decision to change its name from Apple Computers to Apple Inc., with the vision of being a "passionate design company that believed technology could change the world".

In the one of the Management Executive programmes at the Harvard Business School, executives are asked to respond to the following questions:

- If your company were shuttered (closed), to whom would it matter and why?

- Which of your customers would miss you the most and why?

- How long would it take for another firm to step into the void?

> "At heart, most strategies, like most people, involve some mystery. Interpreting that mystery is an abiding responsibility of the chief strategist, the CEO"

>>

Montgomery comments that when these questions are presented, a sudden silence will fall on a class which before was a buzz of energy and discussion. She suggests that the reason for this is not that the questions are complex but that they are so simple.

These three questions, if rephrased to suit the context of a school, are the kinds of questions that principals and governors need to pose to themselves from time to time in relation to their schools:

- If your school was closed, to whom would it matter and why?

- Which of the pupils who attend your school (or their parents and families), would miss your school the most and why?

- How easy would it be for them to find another school that met their needs as well as your school does?

These are questions that go to the root of what you are doing and should be doing at your school. Do the children who attend your school choose to do so because it is the only school or is it because it is the most convenient school for them? Do they attend the school because they believe that there are real advantages to be gained from attending? Is there any part of the education process that distinguishes your school from nearby schools or schools in neighbouring communities and if so, do you know what they are? Are the things that distinguish your school from neighbouring schools the result of sound educational policies and the constructive contributions of your staff or are they the result of things outside of your control, like good facilities and a supportive community?

In answering these questions, you should begin to get some good ideas about the strengths and weaknesses of your school and the things that need to be done to improve it. It is not a SWOT analysis but may well provide the same kinds of information. It is also important to interrogate the answers to these questions rigorously as it is easy to answer in platitudes. Examples of these kinds of platitudes which are common refrain in many schools are statements such as:

"We are a caring school" or "We care about the individual" or "We have excellent teachers" or "We have good discipline". If you cannot explain what these mean in practice and how they are experienced by the pupils, they are just words – used by most schools which consider themselves to be "good". Unpacking what is meant by these kinds of statements is at the heart of any process of review and in the development of strategies aimed at changing focus or enhancing performance.

If you really want to challenge yourself and your staff, try putting these questions to them when you start planning for the new year. Alternatively, try them on the newly-elected members of your school governing body or council. They can also be used to challenge individuals about the contribution they make to the school:

• If you were to leave the school, to whom would it matter and why?

• Which pupils would miss you the most and why?

• How easy do you think it will be to replace you and why?

In the case of individual staff members, one needs to be careful and focus on the "why" part of the questions rather than the "who". We say this because it is our experience that many teachers have inflated opinions of their popularity and "value" to the school. Answering the "why" part of the question, however, is likely to reflect those things which they consider to be important in the contribution that they make. If they are professionals who are concerned about well-being and intellectual development of those whom they teach, this will come out in their answers. If not, one needs to question why they are in teaching in the first place. ■

Does your school matter?

If your school was closed, to whom would it matter and why?

Which of the pupils who attend your school (or their parents and families), would miss your school the most and why?

How easy would it be for them to find another school that met their needs as well as your school does?

References/Notes

[1] *Harvard Business Review* Vol. 86 No. 1, January 2008.

[2] Cynthia A. Montgomery is the Timken Professor of Business Administration and head of the strategy unit at Harvard Business School in Boston.

[3] Cynthia A. Montgomery, "Putting Leadership back into Strategy", HBR Vol. 86 No.1, January 2008.

P.O. Box 2612, CLAREINCH, 7740   Phone: 021 683 2899   Fax: 086 689 5971   Cell: 082 619 0719   E-mail: editor@ednews.co.za
www.ednews.co.za

3

Strategies for School Improvement
Know what matters

Before embarking on any improvement strategy, it is important to have a good understanding of the factors that have the greatest impact on pupil performance.

In the first article in this series, we emphasised the importance of leadership and for the need for a commitment on the part of the principal and others involved in the leadership positions within the school, to champion and drive improvement efforts. Further evidence in support of the important role that principals must play in planning and interpreting improvement strategies is provided on page 2 of this edition in the article, "Good leaders make strategy work"- which is based on material published in the January 2008 edition of the *Harvard Business Review*.

Principals first need to appreciate the importance of strong leadership on their part if they are to achieve the goal of sustained improvement in pupil performance; but it is equally important for them to understand the kinds of changes that need to be made in the way in which their schools and classrooms function if they are to achieve these improvements. There is plenty of research identifying the factors that matter most and we have collated some of the most vital of these as a way of helping principals and others who are keen to bring about the improvements that are so desperately needed in most of our public schools.

Perhaps the most significant of the recent publications on effective schools is the report, "How the world's best-performing school systems come out on top[1]", published in 2007 by the international consultancy McKinsey & Company. We provided a full overview of this report in our xx edition of *SM&L*.

What the authors of this report did was to investigate 25 of the world's education systems, including ten of those which have been shown to be the best performers by international comparative studies. They then examined these top performing systems as measured by pupil performance, and identified the things that they had in common which differentiated them from those systems which performed less well in international studies.

The McKinsey study identified the following as factors that matter:

- The quality of the teachers
- Good teaching
- Concern about the performance of every child
- Setting high expectations for every child
- The quality of the principal
- Strong school leadership
- How principals spend their time
- Making it possible for teachers to learn from one another
- Having systems in place to ensure that every child is provided with high quality instruction

There are clear lessons here for principals, SGBs and district officials about the things that need to be done if they wish to improve the performance of their pupils. These include the following:

- Principals need to exercise strong leadership so as to ensure that:

  - teachers are appointed who have the qualifications and experience to teach the subjects and phases/grades that they will be assigned to in terms of the post that they will be filling

  - union affiliations, personal relationships and other factors which are unrelated to a teacher's professional responsibilities must play no part in the appointment processes

  - when drawing up the timetable, teachers are assigned to the phase, grades, subjects and classes which they are best qualified to teach

  - when teachers arrive at school each day they are adequately prepared for the lessons that they must teach

  - teaching time in the school day is maximised and lessons are never interrupted by non-teaching activities

  - teachers regularly monitor the performance of every pupil they teach and provide appropriate individual support for those who struggle or fall behind

- The principal regularly monitors the teaching and learning process closely in all classrooms, and this monitoring process includes periodic class visits to ensure that teaching is of a high standard

- Teachers regularly meet as a staff to discuss the

>>

4

P.O. Box 2612, CLAREINCH, 7740   Phone: 021 683 2899   Fax: 086 689 5971   Cell: 082 619 0719   E-mail: editor@ednews.co.za
www.ednews.co.za

performance of pupils and the steps they plan take to support those who are struggling. The principal exercises leadership in these meetings to ensure that the focus is on ensuring that all pupils can succeed.

• The principal ensures that there are systems in place to make it possible for teachers to visit one another's classes without leaving classes unattended

• Teachers meet regularly in phase, grade, learning area and subject groups to discuss best practice.

• Teachers are provided with support and opportunities for professional development.

• Every effort is made to reduce the administrative load of teachers and other non-teaching activities which diminish the ability to deliver quality classroom instruction.

The SGB and District Offices can assist in the above by supporting the principal in his or her role as instructional leader, particularly when they are challenged by teachers and union representatives who are unwilling to support best practice and quality teaching. They also need to take a strong stand and challenge any requests (or demands) which disrupt teaching time or require teachers to be away from their schools and classrooms during the school day. This includes requests for training and professional development activities, union activities and sporting and cultural events. District and provincial offices can also help reduce the administrative load of principals and teachers by monitoring the quantity of forms and other paperwork that they send to schools. We can find no evidence from research that supports the notion that more forms produce better results; while intuition suggests that there may well be a negative correlation between the administrative load of principals and teachers, and performance of pupils.

A study by Mel West[2] and others analysed the research findings about schools under challenging circumstances that had achieved sustained improvement and provided information on guidelines produced by the American Federation of Teachers[3]. These guidelines include the following:

• Schools should develop policies that are based on high expectations and clear standards

• The standards need to reflect the needs of the specific school community

• High standards of behaviour need to be enforced

• Staff training and development needs to be properly resourced and should focus on classroom practice

In another study by Cawelti[4], which was mentioned in the same publication, similar strategies were identified - including:

• Emphasis on the importance of standards and the need for improvement

• The establishment of systems to ensure that teachers and pupils remained focused on the standards and on the need for improvement

• A strong belief within the school community that all pupils can achieve

• Principals who demonstrated strong leadership and who recognised that their leadership must extend to the classroom

• An understanding by the principal that accountability and motivation grow from involvement

• The development of teacher-teams (such as SMTs and subject teams) with a strong sense of ownership of the changes being made

In most of the studies reported on by Mel West et al[5], the improvement process started with the staff - encouraging them to "imagine what might be achieved, and increasing their sense of accountability for bringing it about". It is also about changing habits of behaviour and lethargy – habits that had become entrenched in the school. The first step, suggest the authors, is to create an initial momentum and self-belief among staff and pupils that things can and will get better. As we said in the first article of this series, the first step in any school improvement process is a willingness on the part of the principal to take the lead. What we learn from these research findings is that principals can - and do - make a difference and that what distinguishes the best from the rest is their belief that a better and more successful school is possible. ∎

References

1   *How the world's best-performing school systems come out on top*, McKinsey & Company, 2007.

2   M West, M Ainsccow & J Stanford, Sustaining improvement in schools in challenging circumstances: a study of successful practice. *School Leadership and Management, Vol. 25, No. 1*. February 2005.

3   A resource guide for re-designing low performing schools, (American Federation of Teachers, Washington, 1997)

4   G Cawelti, *Portraits of six benchmark schools: diverse approaches to improving student performance*. (New York Education Research services, 1999)

5   ibid.

Research

Do Education Districts make a difference?

District-level data on NSC pass rates suggest that district-level support does impact on pupil performance.

The data which the DoE provided in a written answer to a parliamentary question by the DA's Dr JC Kloppers-Lourens[1] provided some useful and interesting information. The question concerned the performance at district level of Grade 12 candidates in the 2008 NSC examinations. The written reply included an Annexure which provided information about the pass rates of each district in the 2008 NSC examinations, as well as for the SC examinations for the periods 2004 – 2007. What is useful about this information is that it provides a means of measuring how successful districts may have been in supporting the implementation of the new curriculum over the past few years, and of the effectiveness of the training and support that they provided to teachers and schools as they prepared for the first NSC examinations in 2008.

One of the things that stands out from the information is the difference in the number of districts that each province has established. There seems to be no consistency or policy in this regard and, as can be seen from the table, the number of districts varies from 4 in Mpumalanga to 23 in the Eastern Cape. In Limpopo, on average, each district services

> In Limpopo, on average, each district services approximately 824 schools and 353 000 pupils, while in the Northern Cape the equivalent numbers are 123 schools and 53 000 pupils.

approximately 824 schools and 353 000 pupils, while in the Northern Cape the equivalent numbers are 123

schools and 53 000 pupils – these are very significant differences and are not necessarily a product of the pupil population of the province.

What we have done in this exercise is to compare the NSC pass rates of each district in 2008 with the pass rate for the same district in the 2007 SC examinations. It is this change in pass rate, either positive if the pass rate improved, or negative if the pass rate declined, that we have used for comparison purposes and as a measure of the effectiveness of district support. In this model, improved results imply that the district is doing its job in supporting schools and declining results are an indication of the failure of the district office to provide the support and guidance that its schools and teachers needed. Nationally, the pass rate for 2008 was 2.7% lower than the pass rate in 2007. One would therefore expect to observe a similar variation in the pass rate in most of the 82 education districts, the assumption being that the academic and socio-economic profile of the pupils within a district changes little from one year to the next.
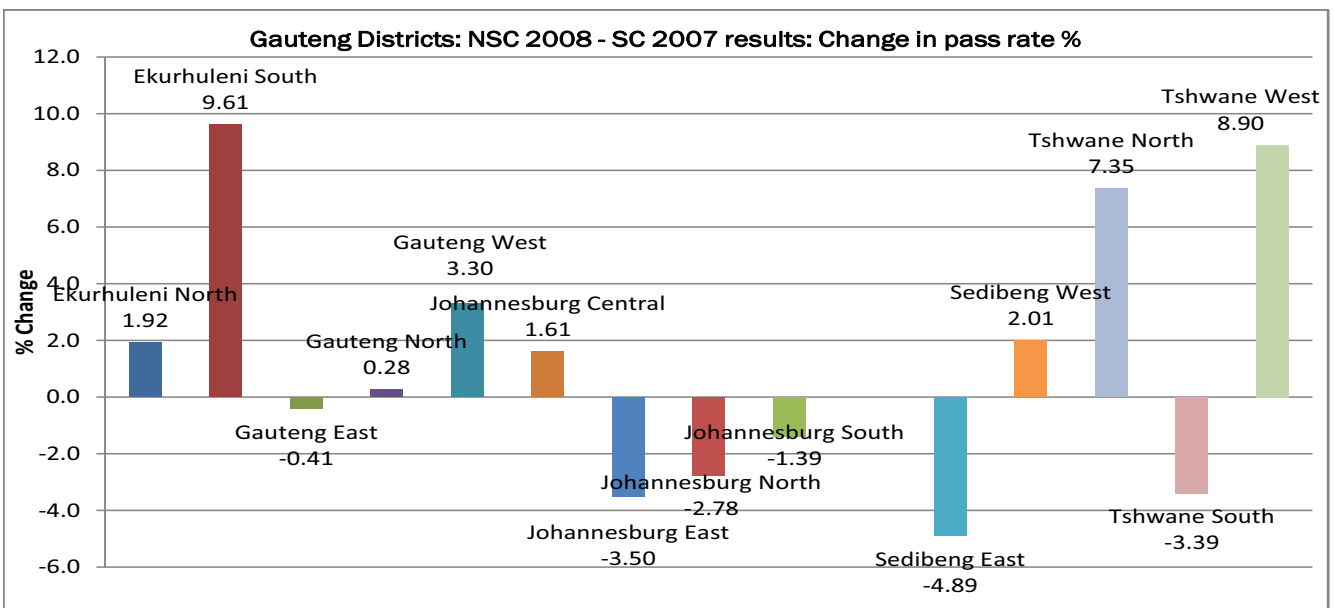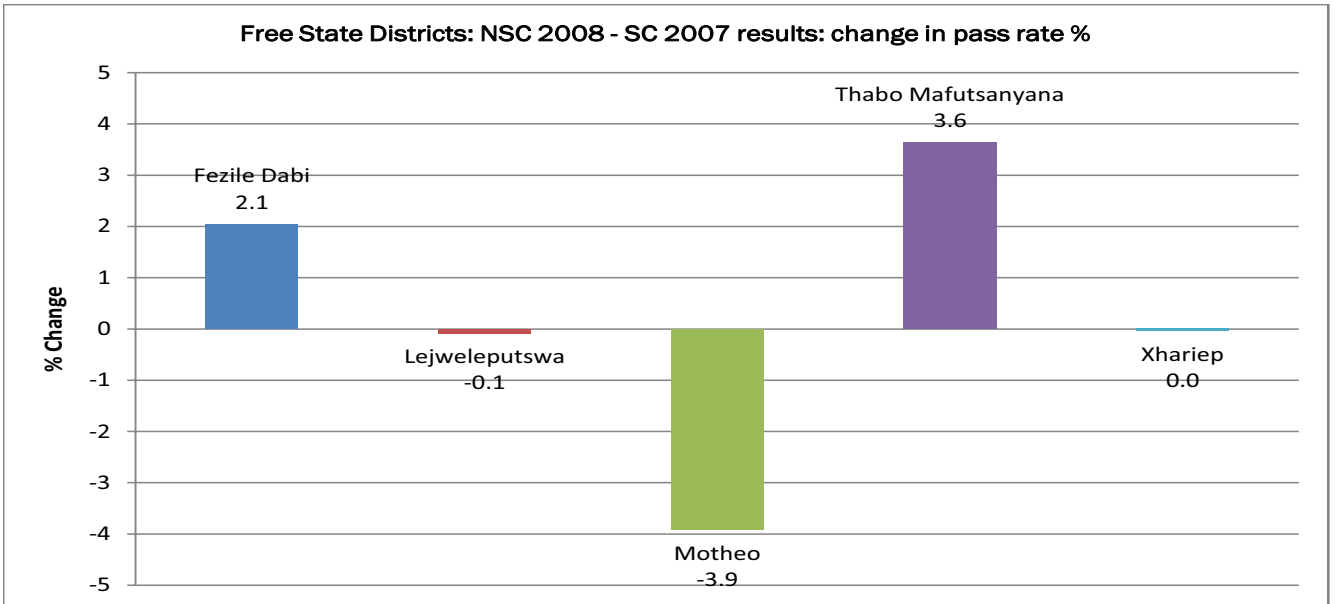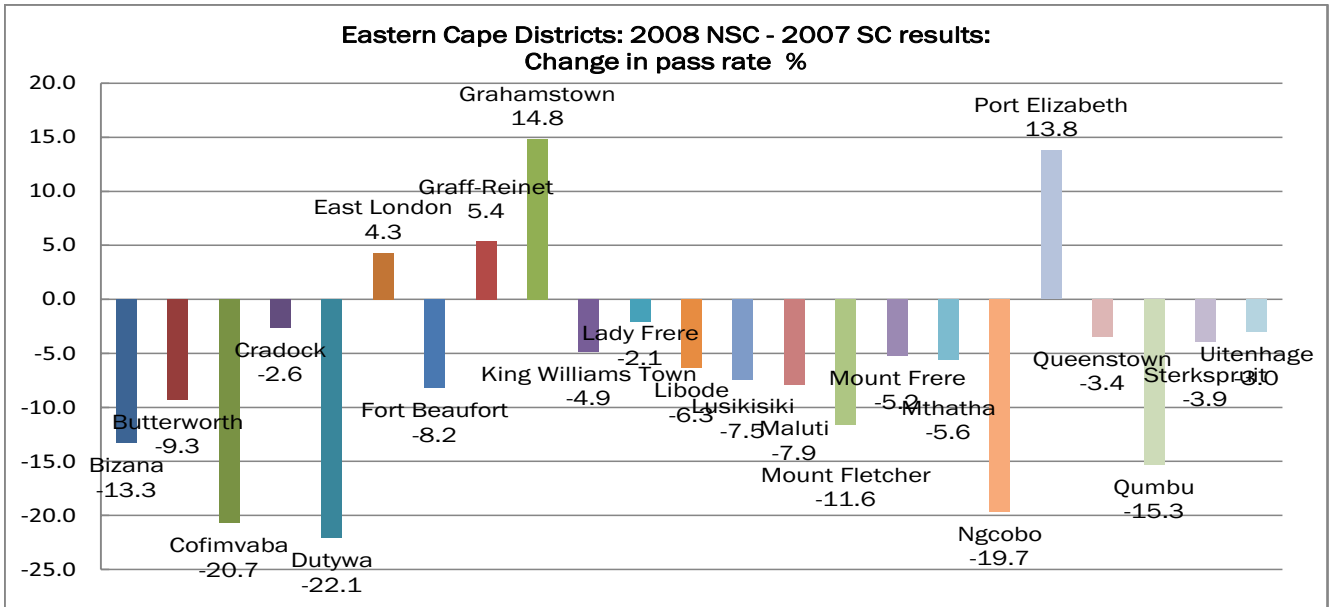
What is most revealing about the figures is the significant change in the average pass rates of districts in the 2008 NSC examinations relative to the average pass rate of the same district in the previous year's SC examinations. As part of our analysis of this data, we calculated the difference in pass rates between 2008 and 2007 for each district. A negative result from this calculation shows that the candidates from that district generally performed less well in 2008 than 2007. This, of course, is to be expected on the basis of the 2.7%
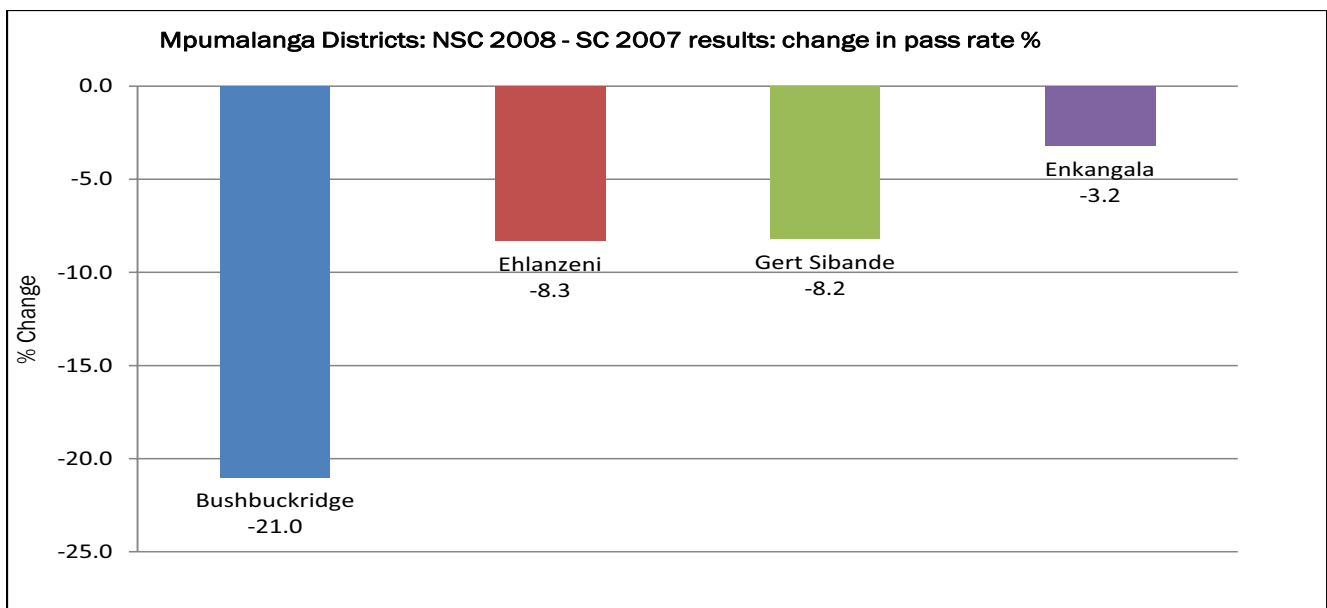
Most improved district in each province

Improvement measured as improvement in SC/NSC pass rates 2007 – 2008

Eastern Cape	Grahamstown (14.8%)
Free State	Thabo Mafutsanyana (3.6%)
Gauteng	Ekurhuleni South (9.6%)
Kwazulu-Natal	Nil
Limpopo	Waterberg (14.3%)
Mpumalanga	Nil
North West	Bophirima (4.8%)
Northern Cape	Frances Baard (5.2%)
Western Cape	Breede River (7.5%)

Eastern Cape Districts: 2008 NSC - 2007 SC results:
Change in pass rate %

Free State Districts: NSC 2008 - SC 2007 results: change in pass rate %

Gauteng Districts: NSC 2008 - SC 2007 results: Change in pass rate %

Kwazulu-Natal Districts: NSC 2008 - SC 2007 results: Change in pass rate %

Limpopo Districts: NSC 2008 - SC 2007 results: Change in pass rate %

Mpumalanga Districts: NSC 2008 - SC 2007 results: change in pass rate %

North West Districts: NSC 2008 - SC 2007 results: change in pass rate %

Northern Cape Districts: NSC 2008 - SC 2007 results: Change in pass rate %

Western Cape Districts: NSC 2008 - SC 2007 results: Change in pass rate %

decline in the pass rate nationally from 2007 to 2008. On average, one should therefore expect a district to score -2.7% in this calculation. Any figure smaller than this is an indication that the district has performed less well than the average and a greater score indicates that the district performed better than the average result. Districts with positive results should therefore be commended on their contribution to this improvement.

In terms of improvement, Limpopo comes out on top by some margin, with improved results in 4 of its 5 districts.

The results as we have illustrated provide some interesting surprises. In terms of improvement, Limpopo comes out on top by some margin, with improved results in 4 of its 5 districts. The only district that did not show any improvement was Capricorn, which showed a negligible decline of 0.02% - which is still better than the national figure of -2.7%. Clearly somebody has been doing something right in the province in terms of the implementation of the new curriculum and in preparing candidates for the first NSC examinations. The next best province is Northern Cape, also with improvement in 4 of its 5 districts with only the Kgalaghadi district showing a relative decline in its passing %. Sadly, in two of the provinces - Kwazulu-Natal and Mpumalanga - there was not a single district which was able to show an improvement in 2008 and for most, the drop in pass rate was significantly worse than the national average.

The variations in performance from district to district within a province are remarkable and because the comparison is based on figures from the same district, the differences are unlikely to be the result of demographic or socio-economic factors. They suggest that in some districts things have happened that have helped pupils to improve their performance. One must also assume that at least some of the interventions that have led to these improvements are the result of work that has been done by those who work in the district office. What we need to find out is what it is what these people have been doing and to get them to share their secrets with the rest of the districts in their province and in the country.

The best-performing district in terms of improvement is Grahamstown in the Eastern Cape, which improved

its pass rate by an amazing 14.8%. Two districts in Limpopo - Mopani (14.0% and Waterberg 14.3%) - also showed improvements of over 14%. The worst-performing district was Dutywa in the Eastern Cape, where the pass rate declined by a staggering 22.1%, from 55% in 2007 to 32.9% in 2008. One can only assume from this result and from the results of other similar districts that their Grade 12 candidates were hopelessly underprepared for the examinations and had little idea of what would be expected of them. Regrettably, there were 3 other districts where there was a decline of more than 15%: Bushbuckridge in Mpumalanga with a decline of 21%, and the districts of Cofimvaba (20.7%), Qumbu (15.3%) and Ngcobo (19.7%) in the Eastern Cape. These districts and the others which showed a significant decline in results all have some explaining to do. We trust that in the light of the President's commitment to improving our educational output, the MECs and DGs from these provinces are interrogating the Directors of these

---

Sadly, in two of the provinces - Kwazulu-Natal and Mpumalanga - there was not a single district which was able to show an improvement in 2008

---

districts in an effort to ensure that the acts and omissions of last year are not repeated in 2009. We suspect, however, that for the class of 2009 it is already too late. Good results require 12 years of hard work and educational commitment from all the players - parents, pupils, teachers and district officials - not 6 - 12 months of stuffing from abridged texts, study aids and the like. This kind of approach may provide some short-term relief in terms of NSC pass rates but in doing so simply pushes the systemic deficiencies of Basic Education to Higher Education, leaving them to deal with the mess which is not of their making. A far more helpful approach would be research and follow-up to find out what has been happening at those districts where there has been improvement so that everyone can learn about what it is that makes the difference. ■

> The passing % in some districts may have changed as a result of substantial changes in the number of candidates who wrote the examinations in 2007 and 2008. At the time of going to press we had not yet been able to determine whether this may have had any significant influence on the results of affected districts.

References

[1] This information was obtained from the DoE website http://www.education.gov.za/. The information was originally provided as an Annexure to a written reply to a question (Question 580) in the National Assembly.

Research

What makes an effective school district?

The American Institute for Research (AIR) provides some useful advice on the kinds of things that education districts can and should do to support underperforming schools.

A research paper produced by the American Institute for Research (AIR) provides some useful advice on the kinds of things that education districts can and should do to support underperforming schools. The paper, with the title "Toward More Effective School Districts: A Review of the Knowledge Base"[1] is the result of work done by the research team in an attempt to investigate the relationship between district effectiveness and pupil performance.

> They looked to answer the following question, "What does it take to achieve high-performing school districts, particularly ones serving low-income children?"

Initially they looked to answer the following question, "What does it take to achieve high-performing school districts, particularly ones serving low-income children?" Interestingly, they comment at the start of their paper that "surprisingly few researchers and policymakers had focused on this question" and that in the past "district leaders such as school board members, superintendents, and central office administrators were often dismissed as barriers to sustained school improvement" – sounds familiar!

Based on their review of the literature, they were able to provide what they call "preliminary" answers to the question, "What does the research and public policy literature suggest about (a) the components of high-performing, high-poverty school districts and (b) the strategies that help districts move towards effectiveness?" They admit that these findings should be considered to be "preliminary" and "tentative"; however, they do seem to contain some useful guidelines and we believe that Provincial and District officials should take cognisance of these findings.

The authors organise their findings of the strategies used by high-performing, high-poverty districts into seven "Primary Themes" and four "Secondary Themes" based on the extent and validity of the evidence supporting each "theme". The evidence in

support for the seven primary themes is more specific and corroborative than that of the secondary themes.

Primary Themes

1   Successful districts focus first and foremost on student achievement and learning.

To raise pupil achievement successfully, districts need to make improving achievement their main and even their only priority. Bureaucracy and organisational matters should not be allowed to distract district leaders from the primary objective of improving pupil achievement. The importance of this focus needs to be stressed to all district staff and stakeholders. To emphasise this message, the authors suggest that all leaders at district and school level redefine their personal role to that of "instructional leader" with the improvement of teaching and learning as their main mission.

2   Successful districts have a theory of action for how to effect improvement and they establish clear goals.

It is not enough for the district to make raising pupil achievement as their priority. The district also needs to decide exactly how it plans to do this in practice. This means having a clear idea about what should happen in every school and how they plan to ensure that good teaching happens in every lesson. They need to set out a clear action plan indicating the things that need to be done, how and by whom they will be done and the timelines and steps involved in every process. There have to be clear, specific and measurable goals so it is possible to monitor and mark their progress.

3   Successful districts enact comprehensive, coherent reform policies.

In the USA where these studies were carried out, school districts have far more independence than do our districts in terms of such things as the curriculum and assessment policies. As a result, this recommendation is of less relevance to our situation. The authors do, however, stress the importance of adopting comprehensive long-term strategies rather

than quick fixes. They also suggest that it is better to focus on a few key processes or on just some schools, rather than trying to do everything or to improve all schools at once. The value of this approach is that it helps to ensure that everyone's attention is devoted to those key tasks and/or to those schools that need it most.

4   Educators in successful districts accept personal responsibility for improving student learning and receive support to help them succeed.

The emphasis here is on accountability based on a strongly-held belief that all pupils can succeed and a refusal to make excuses for poor performance. It requires a willingness on the part of district officials and principals to take responsibility for the success of their schools and for teachers to take responsibility for the performance of the pupils they teach. Part and parcel of this acceptance of responsibility is the need for data, such as test scores, which "honestly" and "accurately" reflect the levels of pupil performance.

Teachers also need to be provided with appropriate additional support and training in exchange for their willingness to accept responsibility for the performance of those whom they teach.

5   Successful districts are committed to professional learning at all levels and provide multiple, meaningful learning opportunities

Those at district offices must only believe that all pupils can succeed, they also need to believe that all teachers and principals can learn - and in doing so improve their professional competence in areas that matter. From this arises the need to provide teachers and principals with "consistent, continuing, high-quality professional development". The authors note that one source recommends that districts invest 5% of their resources in adult learning and leadership development. Principals need to be provided with opportunities to learn through networks, through mentorships and through additional professional training focused on their role as instructional leader.

6   Successful districts use data to guide improvement strategies

This was the most cited of the elements of district success, according to the authors. Districts need to collect and collate data not only about pupil performance but also about what is happening at an individual level in classrooms, school and within district offices. The data then needs to be analysed to provide usable and useful information about performance at every level of the system.

7   Successful districts regularly monitor progress and intervene if necessary

Simply having an improvement plan is not enough. There needs to be a system of gathering information that can be used to monitor the effectiveness of the implementation processes as they are happening. The data gathered then needs to be used to identify strengths and weaknesses of the processes, to refine plans and to develop focused alternative approaches where plans have gone awry.

Secondary Themes

These are the themes for which there was less certainty about impact on district effectiveness.

8   Partnerships and stakeholder involvement:

This refers mainly to things such as the involvement of parents, community members and business in the work of the district.

9   District – school collaboration, shared responsibility and autonomy:

This refers to the relationship between the school and the district and to the level of autonomy that individual schools may be given. The suggestion is that high-performing schools be given greater autonomy.

10 Resource acquisition and allocation:

Some research suggests that the ways in which resources are allocated needs to reflect the district's goals and be biased towards schools with the greatest need.

11 Customised support for schools:

Success is more likely if districts develop intervention strategies that are purpose-designed for individual schools rather than using a 'one size fits all' approach. ∎

Reference

[1] D. Dailey, S. Fleischman, L. Gil, D. Holtzman, J. O'Day, C. Vosmer, Toward More Effective School Districts: A Review of the Knowledge Base, (American Institute of Research, May 2005) downloaded from: http://www.air.org/projects.

Innovation
Web-based walk-throughs

Schools and school districts in the USA are using web-based technology to capture, collate and analyse data collected during brief, classroom observation visits by principals.

Regular classroom observation is not common practice in most schools in this country, despite the fact that it is one of the most effective ways of promoting and supporting good classroom practice. There are also schools where until quite recently the very idea of classroom visits and observation was considered taboo and an infringement of the professional "rights" of the teacher. Regrettably, this view was also appears to have had tacit support from a major teacher union.

Fortunately, sense is beginning to prevail and the introduction of the IQMS and WSE in 2003 saw classroom observation becoming part of the process used in the professional evaluation of teachers and as a way of assisting in identifying focus areas for improvement. Unfortunately the classroom observation model provided for in these processes is rather cumbersome - partly as a result of historical perceptions and suspicions about its purpose - and this limits its value as an instrument of staff development. The results are rather like examination results: they give an indication of the level of performance but provide little help in determining what needs to be done to improve performance. Individual teachers are also unlikely to work to improve their classroom practice as a result of the one or two classroom visits associated with the IQMS processes, particularly if these visits are once-a-year events. What is more likely to happen is that as the annual season of IQMS visits approaches teachers prepare once-off lessons to showcase their talent, thereby giving a false impression of what really happens in their classes on a daily basis. The fact that the results from these visits are linked to salary and are used for post progression purposes further diminishes their value as an instrument for professional growth.

If inexperienced and underperforming teachers are to grow as professionals and improve their classroom practice, they need to engage in conversations with experienced and competent colleagues about the things that they do that matter. For greatest impact, these conversations need to be based on shared experience of actual lessons. It is also important to appreciate that there is value to be gained by both sides in the observation process and that a teacher can learn as much from being observed as she can from observing the lesson of a colleague. These benefits accrue irrespective of level of experience or competence of the teachers involved, although one would normally expect the inexperienced teachers to gain more from these kinds of interactions. It is the conversations that happen before and after the lesson, however, where most of the learning happens, which is why regular classroom observation is such a critical element of any school improvement strategy. This is confirmed by substantial research findings which show that it is "quality teaching" that has the single greatest influence on pupil performance.

> One of the great advantages of this kind of regular visitation is that it encourages discussion around issues of teaching and of best practice

Although regular classroom observation is not common practice in most of the schools in this country, this does not mean that it does not happen. There are many schools where classroom visits by the principal, subject and phase heads are a regular occurrence, as are visits from colleagues who teach the same subject or phase. One of the great advantages of this kind of regular visitation is that it encourages discussion around issues of teaching and of best practice. This in itself ensures that teachers focus on their core responsibility of teaching and learning. What is also obvious from visits to schools where regular classroom observation is a common practice is the absence of the kinds of tensions that are normally associated with it.

There are parts of the world where regular classroom visits by the principal and senior members of staff are common practice and in some states in the USA, it is mandatory for the principal to visit a certain number of lessons each week. What is also interesting is that these visits may be limited to just a part of the lesson, with the principal or supervising teacher doing what is called a lesson "walk-through". In practice this means that the principal arrives in the class with an observation check-list of specific items that he/she plans to observe. These can include such things as the use of teaching aids, the kinds of questions that the teachers ask, lesson plans, and the nature of the work that the pupils may be doing. The observer may engage individual pupils in conversations about the things that they are doing. What may be even more surprising to the principals and teachers in this country is that these kinds of visits can take place several times a week and although the person doing the visiting is likely to vary but may be the principal, a subject

or phase head or even a colleague. It is accepted in these schools as part and parcel of what needs to happen if they are to consider themselves to be truly learning communities.

The February 2007 Newsletter[1] published by The Centre for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement, provides a good overview of Classroom Walk-throughs. In the article a classroom "walk-through" or "learning walk" is defined as a "brief, structured, non-evaluative classroom

---

A classroom "walk-through" or "learning walk" is defined as a "brief, structured, non-evaluative classroom observation by the principal that is followed by a conversation between the principal and the teacher about what was observed"

---

observation by the principal that is followed by a conversation between the principal and the teacher about what was observed". They go on to note that if used well, classroom walk-throughs provide both the principal and the teacher with valuable information about the state of the school's instructional programme. One of the greatest advantages of walk-throughs is that principals see teachers teaching more often. However, their primary purpose is to create opportunities for discussion around issues of teaching and learning between the teacher and the principal.

Three common elements

The article goes on to list three common elements of effective walk-throughs. The elements are:

Brevity:

They should not last longer than 10 minutes, with one commentator suggesting that "If we are in the classroom longer than three minutes, then it defeats the purpose of gathering first impressions". The idea is to gather a "snapshot' of the classroom at the time of the visit. Walk-throughs should also not be seen as a substitute for longer periods of observation. Rather, they are a form of data-gathering which aims to create an image of what is happening in every classroom and for the school as a whole by putting together many smaller images, much like one would build a jigsaw puzzle from its pieces. The emphasis should therefore be on many short visits rather than on few longer visits.

Focus:

If walk-throughs are to serve their intended purpose there needs to be absolute clarity and agreement about what is to be observed. The principal and teacher need to meet and decide what the principal will be looking for and what he/she will be listening for. The decision about the focus will depend on the development goals of the school and decisions that may have been taken, at school, phase

and/or subject level, about specific needs and priorities. The more specific and detailed the decision about what will be observed, the better - because this makes it possible to aggregate the information over time and to quantify the results.

Dialogue:

The dialogue or conversation between the principal and teacher, which should follow every visit, is the most important component of the process. The authors of the article[2] refer the work of Hall and Hord[3] in noting that "one-on-one, focused feedback is the most powerful staff development approach available to impact teacher behaviour". To be effective, questions need to be reflective in nature. Questions such as, 'Why did you choose this approach?' and 'Do you think that it worked?' compel the teacher to consider the reasons for adopting the practices and approaches that (s)he used.

Although we may have suggested that walk-throughs are the preserve of principals or senior members of staff, this is not our intention. They can be equally valuable if used by subject or phase heads and grade heads for visits the classrooms of the members of their subject, phase or grade teams. Members of subject teams can also gain from visits to one another's lessons with a focus on the effectiveness of different approaches to the teaching of particular element of the curriculum. One of the advantages of the brevity of walk-throughs at the level of subject head and classroom teacher is that the problem of arranging supervision of classes is reduced because of the visit-time is relatively short. It is far easier to persuade a colleague to give up just part of a "free" lesson to supervise your class while you embark on a 10-minute walking-through than to ask the colleague to do the same thing for a whole lesson. Another advantage, as mentioned earlier, is the great benefit that accrues when teachers reflect on and discuss their classroom practice.

In schools where classroom walk-throughs are common and use is made of a specific instrument – for example a questionnaire or checklist – to gather information about what is observed, it becomes possible to collate and aggregate this information. With further analysis, this information can be used to create a profile of the classroom practice of every teacher. This in turn can provide further useful material for more in-depth discussions. To illustrate how this could work, we have provided an example of a data-gathering instrument included in a document published by the Kentucky Department of Education. If this same instrument was used for 10 walk-throughs of the class of the same teacher, the data collected could be summarised and may show, for example, that on 8 of the visits the teacher was sitting at his desk/computer and on the other two occasions was involved in assessing pupil work. The summary may also show that for the majority of visits the pupil activity observed was paper/pencil based. While none of these kinds of activities

>>

are problematic in themselves, this evidence opens up the opportunity for discussion about different approaches, about the need for variety and about which approaches are most appropriate in terms of the topic, academic profile and grade of the class and even the time of day.

Technology in the form of school-wide ICT networks, databases, laptops, pdas, cell phones and web-pages make it possible to automate most of the data-gathering and analytical processes involved. In practice this would mean, as a first step, using a desktop or laptop computer to capture the information collected during visits into a suitable database which can collate, sort and present the information in a way that will make it easy view and interpret. With the database set up on a school network (intranet), it becomes possible constantly to update the teaching profile of a teacher after every visit to their classroom. Teacher in turn will have the facility to get an immediate view of the results of the visit so that the follow-up discussion can take place with both parties having had access to the information. Accessibility and confidentiality can easily be controlled by use of passwords and similar features. The greater and more specific the information collected, the more informative and helpful the profile becomes.

Web-based walk-throughs take the process a step further, with the database located on the World Wide Web (www) either as part of the school's own website or as a separate entity. The only difference between this and either the pen and paper model or the intranet model is that the information would be accessed as one accesses a website, using a browser and a web address. The big advantage of this is that it makes it possible to access the information from anywhere and any device provided it has the facility to access the web a facility which is already available in many cell phones. This model is likely to prove increasingly practicable for all schools as more and more teachers gain access to laptops with the role-out of the DoE's Teacher Laptop initiative.

This use of web-based walk-throughs of this kind is already a reality in many parts of the world with the Education Department of the State of Kentucky (USA) being one of the leaders in this regard. It was their excellent publication *Web-based classroom walk-throughs and professional learning communities*[4] which suggested the need for an article on this topic. We plan to bring you some of their advice and the advice and ideas of others with experience in this approach to classroom observation in the next edition of *SM&L*. ∎

First Fifteen Minutes

This walk-though is based on a paper version from the Kentucky Association of School Administrators and focuses on the first 15 minutes of a class. We have amended it slightly and added some comments to help readers who may not be familiar with the terminology used.

☐ Greets students at the door and makes eye contact with each student

☐ Ready to teach

☐ Engages students in 90 seconds (from start of lesson)

Bell work/sponge activity (These are activities that engage students as they arrive in class at the start of a lesson)

    ☐ Attendance in silence

    ☐ Assignment board

    ☐ Turn-in box (box in which student place completed assignments or homework)

    ☐ Handout box (box from which students can collect work or marked assignments)

☐ Seating chart (A plan showing the desk/table assigned to each student)

☐ Gains attention/focus of entire class

☐ Review (connects prior learning and present learning)

Provides essential question(s) and indicates what students need to know by lesson's end

    ☐ Objectives

    ☐ Core content

    ☐ What I think you should know today

States why students are learning content

    ☐ Class brainstorms why information is important

    ☐ Explains why the information is important

    ☐ Emphasises importance in another way

Provides hook, set-up, anticipation, and prediction (Strategies used to provoke stimulate student interest in the lesson material)

    ☐ Appears to know students' interests

    ☐ Engages emotions

    ☐ Other good technique

References

[1] *Using the Classroom Walk-Through as an Instructional Leadership Strategy*, The Centre for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement Newsletter (February 2007). http://www.centerforcsri.org/files/TheCenter_NL_Feb07.pdf

[2] Ibid

[3] Hall, G.E. & Hord, S.M., *Implementing change: Patterns, principles and potholes*. (Allyn & Bacon, Boston 2000)

[4] *Web-based classroom walk-throughs and professional learning communities*, Kentucky Department of Education, (Frankfort, KY., 2008)

News
Education-related Parliamentary questions

One of the ways that the public and Parliament are able to hold the Government to account is by submitting questions through the parliamentary processes to the appropriate ministry. These questions may require a written reply, which in the case of education are posted on the DoE website. As is to be expected, most of these questions are submitted by members of the Opposition as a means of getting information from the ruling party and/or in an effort to embarrass or discredit it in instances where they think the government may not be meeting its obligations.

The replies to questions often provide information which may not normally be available to schools and the general public. The information below which we think may be of interest to our readers has been gleaned from some of these replies.

The Minister's reply to questions put by Mr DA Kganare of COPE, regarding ICT in schools and the roll-out of laptops, provided the following interesting items of information.

On teachers who have received ICT training

- 52 915 trained in basic ICT skills
- 31 091 trained in the use of ICT for administrative purposes
- 23 980 trained in ICT integration
- 22 361 trained in technical support
- 1 578 trained to offer Computer Applications Technology

On ICT training for principals

400 principals are currently involved in the management and use of ICT in schools as part of Module 12 of the pilot Advanced Certificate in Education (ACE) programme.

The Minister's reply to questions put by Dr JC Kloppers-Lourens of the DA about the performance of school districts in SC and NSC examinations provided the following items of information.

• There are a total of 82 districts distributed across the 9 provinces

• High-performing districts are defined as those having consistently obtained a pass rate of between 75% and 100% over the past 5 years. 11 districts are listed in this category.

• Average districts are defined as those that have consistently obtained a pass rate of between 50% and 74.9% over the past 5 years. 17 districts are listed in this category.

• Districts that need recovery interventions are those that have consistently performed below the 60% mark for the past five years. These districts are considered to be districts "at risk" and in need of special intervention measures. 9 districts are listed in this category, all from the Eastern Cape.

These figures clearly do not add up (11 + 17 + 9 = 37). One must assume that the remaining 45 districts are covered by the following caveat in the reply, "It must be noted that there are several districts that are regarded as average in terms of their performance in that they demonstrated fluctuating performances between the years".

• The best-performing district in 2008 and also the best-performing district on average over the past 5 years (2004 – 2008) is the Namaqua district in the Northern Cape, with a 90.38% pass rate in 2008 and an average pass rate for the past 5 years of 87.7%

The reply also indicates that the National Strategy for Learner Attainment (NSLA), launched by the former Minister of Education in 2004, has become, in all provinces, the flagship programme for improving the level of attainment of all learners across the system. The reply includes a list 12 interventions that the national and provincial departments are engaged in as part of this initiative. Sadly, there is little evidence that these interventions are bearing fruit if one looks at the Annexure of results for the period for each of the districts, which was provided as part of the reply. ■