

Management & Leadership

POLICY

LEADERSHIP

MANAGEMENT

GOVERNANCE

for South African Schools

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SM&L

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The impact on schooling of the long mid-year break for the 2010 World Cup, the work of Subject Advisors and more...

In this edition we examine two important issues - the possible negative impact of this year's five-week mid-year break on pupil learning and the academically debilitating consequences for children who fail to learn to read at the appropriate level by the end of their Grade 3 year. We also make some suggestions about the roles and responsibilities of district-based subject advisors - this in response to the recommendations of the Ministerial Committee which reviewed the implementation of the National Curriculum Statement.

While we understand the reasoning behind the decision to extend the mid-year school holiday so that schools remain closed for the duration of the World Cup, our concerns relate to research undertaken in the USA which found that the reading scores of some children regressed by up to 2 months following their long summer holiday at the end of their academic year. What is more disturbing about these findings is that the set-back in reading progress was most prevalent in the children of families from lower socio-economic groups. By contrast, the children of better-off middle class families maintained or even improved their reading levels over the long holiday period. This was apparently because they were better supervised by parents who encouraged them to read during the holidays and who were more insistent that they involved themselves in active and constructive pursuits including visits to libraries and museums and community-based educational programmes. If the World Cup is not to leave our education system with an undesirable legacy, schools, education districts and community-based organisations will need to step in and provide children with a range of constructive and educationally sound recreational activities during the five-week break.

Interestingly, the research findings which were the basis of our article on the impact that failure to learn to read by the end of Grade 3 has on a child's future academic success makes a similar point about the effect of the long summer break on pupil learning and particularly their reading level. One of the frightening findings of this research from a South African perspective is evidence which suggests that there is a direct link between the ability of a child to read at the end of Grade 3 and their likelihood of passing at the end of Grade 12. The evidence showed that children who were unable to read at the appropriate level at the end of Grade 3 were unlikely to meet the requirements for a pass when they reached Grade 12. It is a startling finding and one which suggests that the energy we expend on trying to improve NSC results in Grade 12 should rather be directed at improving reading levels in Grades R to 3.

The article on the role and responsibilities of District-based Subject Advisors is an attempt to influence their job description which the DBE should be redefining in terms of the recommendations of the Ministerial Committee which reviewed the implementation of the NCS. If you think our suggestions are sound, please feel free to photocopy the article and pass it on to the district officials and subject advisors who work with your school - we hope that it will encourage them to work more closely and more constructively with schools. ■

Opinion

Guidelines for subject advisors

Some suggestions on how district-based subject advisors and other officials should approach their relationships with their schools and the kinds of support that they should provide

In past editions we have regularly raised concerns about the extent to which District Directors and district-based Subject Advisors have taken to heart the recommendations of the Ministerial Task Team which reviewed the implementation of the NCS. Given the fact that the Minister has accepted the final report and most of its recommended timelines, one must assume that provinces, districts and schools would take cognisance of these as they plan their work for the new school year. The role and responsibilities of Subject Advisors are dealt with fairly extensively in the report. Based on our own study of the report and its recommendations and the kind of role that we believe Subject Advisors can and should play in supporting teachers, we offer the following suggestions on what Subject Advisors can do to improve their impact on the quality of teaching and learning in the schools that they serve.

Our advice

Become an expert in your subject field.

As a subject advisor, you need to have a thorough grounding in the disciplines of the subject(s) for which you are expected to provide advice and support. As a minimum, you need to have passed at least the first year of a university major in the subject(s) but ideally should have a third-year Bachelor-degree-level qualification in the subject. If you are insufficiently qualified, consider improving your qualifications through part-time study.

Become an expert in the teaching of your subject field.

Not only do you need to be adequately qualified in the disciplines of the subject, but you also need to have a thorough grounding in its pedagogy (how to teach it). This would normally have been part of your professional qualification such as a PGCE but may not have been. In any event, approaches to teaching a subject change and, if you are not in the classroom, your teaching and your views on teaching the subject may become rusty. It is important therefore that you stay abreast of the latest developments by accessing resources such as professional journals.

Subscribe to at least on specialist professional journal

Either subscribe yourself or insist that the district subscribes to at least one specialist professional journal

for your subject and/or phase and read every issue from cover to cover.

This kind of reading should form part of the professional development of every teacher. Make photocopies of any articles which you find interesting, or which contain useful or creative approaches to teaching, and distribute them to the subject teachers of your district. By doing so, you will not only be helping them improve their skills, you will also, by your example, be demonstrating that you are serious about your own professional development.

Identify the best 10 specialist websites that you can find for your subject.

Good educational websites provide a range of useful features and resources, including lesson plans and discussion forums about the teaching of specific subjects. Tag the best that you find and visit them regularly for fresh ideas about the teaching of your subject. There are literally thousands of websites for every teaching subject, although not all of them are good. Spend some time searching for those which provide the kinds of information and resources which you think will be helpful to you and your teachers. The teachers that you work with may be able to provide you with the web addresses of sites that they have found to be useful. Keep this list updated and handy so that you can direct new and struggling teachers to those websites which may be helpful to them.

Have a thorough knowledge of all official policy/curriculum documents related to your subject speciality.

Keep a separate file of all official curriculum documents (the ones that are issued by the DBE) and make quite sure that you know which are policy documents, and which are guideline documents. Keep documents issued by the province and district in a separate file. Mark the front cover/page of each of these documents clearly with the title and date of the policy document on which they are based. Go through these documents, highlighting those parts which have clear links to the official policy documents so you can distinguish in them what is and what is not policy. Re-read all curriculum policy documents regularly to be quite sure that you understand what is required of teachers and pupils in terms of the curriculum. If necessary, consult other curriculum advisors and well-

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qualified and experienced teachers about what the documents mean.

Keep updated, personally annotated and indexed, working copies of all official policy/curriculum documents at hand at all times.

The master copy of your curriculum file should be well thumbed. Use it when teachers ask you questions about the curriculum so that you can show them exactly what the policy says and what the document looks like that contains the policy. Share the notes you have made with them and encourage them to put together a similar file for their own use. Remember, part of your job as a leader is to model good practice.

Distinguish clearly between those documents which represent formal policy and those which are simply guidelines.

As has already been indicated, it is vital that you are able to distinguish between those curriculum documents which represent formal policy and those which are guideline documents or local interpretations of policy documents. One simple way to ensure that there is no confusion is to mark the front page or cover of every curriculum document with either the words "National Policy" or with the words "Provincial/District Guidelines".

Gather together a complete set of all available approved textbooks, teachers' guides and revision guides for your subject in your office.

Each textbook publisher and its teams of authors have differing views on how the National Curriculum Statement should be interpreted and how each subject should be taught. Most authors are experienced subject specialists with a good knowledge both of their subject and of the way it should be taught. The bigger publishers may also produce more than one textbook series for a subject, with each series aimed at a different sector of the market. So, for instance, there may be a series which is designed to be used by less affluent rural schools in which the Language of Learning and Teaching (LOLT) is not the same as the home language of either the pupils or their teachers. In these textbooks, the authors and editors take care to use simpler language. New words and terms will also be explained in an effort to help pupils whose language skills are weak.

Having a range of textbooks available in your office for reference purposes adds value to the support that you are able to offer to the schools and teachers with whom you work. This kind of assistance is likely to make teachers far more appreciative of the work that you do

- and also more willing to accept the guidance and support that you are able to provide.

Carefully review and make notes on each of the textbooks in your collection.

Having a range of textbooks available is one thing but to get the most from them in reality you need to have some idea of the strengths and weaknesses of each series title. Work your way steadily through each series, making notes on such things as curriculum/syllabus coverage, language use and the quality of the assessment tasks. Do the same with the teachers' guides, checking carefully to see that the cross-referencing between the teachers' guides and the textbooks that the pupils use is good. Check also that the teachers' guides provide correct and appropriate advice. Summarise your findings on a single A4 sheet for later reference. If you have good ICT skills you may find it easier and more useful to capture this information in a database or spreadsheet. This will make it possible for you to sort and extract useful information from your database rapidly.

Identify the three textbook series in your subject which you consider to be the best for each school phase (i.e. Foundation phase, Intermediate phase, Senior phase, etc.)

It is important to have a good idea about which textbook series you consider to be most suitable for the teachers at the schools that you serve. Be careful, however, not to be seen to be supporting one publisher at the expense of others as this is likely to promote unethical behaviour and encourage corrupt practices. It is also important that you can justify your choice on sound educational grounds. Be sure, therefore, that you have a list of valid reasons for your preferences.

Know the names of all of the teachers who teach your subject in the schools which fall under your jurisdiction.

You need to know your teachers and their particular strengths and weaknesses. Keep a database of the personal details, qualifications and the grades taught, for each of the teachers whom you are required to support. The easiest place to keep this kind of information is on a computerised database but if you do not have a computer you can maintain a record of the same kind of information using a paper-based filing system. Once this has been established, make sure that your data on individual teachers is kept up to date. This means by keeping a record of every professional interaction that you have with a teacher. Use this information to refresh your memory before you visit teachers in their schools or observe their classes.

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Identify the best/most successful five teachers of your subject and consult them regularly about the pedagogy that they are using.

It is important to make allies of your best teachers. They are likely to be people who are keen on what they do and most will be more than willing to share their ideas with others. Because they are in the classroom every day, and you are not, they will have a much better appreciation than you can have of what works and what does not. Observe their lessons regularly and encourage them to share their best ideas and good practice with you and with others. They will be pleased that you have acknowledged their good work in this way - and the enhanced status that your acknowledgment brings.

Identify the subject heads (for your subject) whose subject departments produce the best results within your circuit/group of schools and invite them, together with the five best teachers, to become your advisory panel.

Subject heads of the most successful subject departments may not necessarily be the best teachers but they are likely to have a very thorough knowledge of the content and skills that should be taught as pupils proceed through the grades and phases. Some may be far more experienced and better qualified than you are and as such are probably your best source of good advice on the needs of schools and teachers. Do not feel that acknowledging their expertise diminishes your status, as this is unlikely to happen. They are more likely to value your openness and may well become your strongest allies and best source of good practical advice on what constitutes best practice. Listen to their complaints and criticism carefully and invite them to make suggestions on how best to improve the situation. Most will understand that there are policy, bureaucratic and funding restraints which place limits on what you are able to do and are unlikely to blame you for these.

Meet regularly (quarterly) with this advisory group and consult them before making any changes.

The fact that you are willing to consult your teachers will make a big difference in the way in which you are perceived. Their understanding of the problems you face and the fact that they have contributed to the solutions you propose will increase the chances of their backing you when decisions are challenged. Working with them will also ensure that your engagement with them and their teachers is likely to be positive and constructive rather than negative and confrontational.

Visit your schools regularly and encourage subject teams to invite you to their subject planning meetings.

There is no better way to get to know your schools and teachers than by visiting them at their place of work and observing them as they plan and teach. When invited, attend as an observer rather than as an active participant. Look first for the positives, the things that they are doing well, rather than their shortcomings. Make a list of these so that you use them when you are asked to comment on what you have found. This helps to create a positive environment. You are also likely to find a number of shortcomings or weaknesses in even the best-run schools and subject departments. Focus on just one or two items as priority areas for improvement as they are more likely to remain positive and willing to accept your criticism if you identify just one or two items.

Visit classrooms regularly on an informal basis to observe teachers teaching.

All the research shows that it is what happens in the classroom that matters most in terms of pupil performance. For results to improve, teachers must do a better job in the classroom and as a subject advisor, this should be your number one priority. But you cannot give appropriate advice without first observing teachers teaching. One of the best ways to measure the extent to which you are focusing your efforts on your primary task is to monitor, on a weekly basis, the amount of time that you spend either in class observing lessons or in pre- and post-lesson discussion with those teachers whose classes you visit. If the majority of your time is devoted to these three tasks, then you are probably doing what you are supposed to be doing; if not, then you need to re-prioritise your working arrangements to ensure that you do.

Share best practice.

Use what you learn from classroom visits to share and promote best practice. The subject teaching teams of your schools are probably your most valuable resource and you need to see your role as a conduit for the sharing of their collective experience. No two schools or teachers are the same and all will have skills and/or ideas and/or experiences which may prove valuable to others. Encourage your teachers to share work schemes and lesson plans as well as tests, examination papers and other forms of assessment. It is unlikely to happen if you do not encourage it - and help with the sharing and distribution of shared material.





Help develop and support professional learning communities by encouraging teachers who teach your subject to meet informally on a regular basis.

It is unfortunate that in this country there are few subject-based professional associations of teachers. There are, however, a number of teachers who meet regularly in informal groupings to discuss their professional practice. These informal groups are mostly to be found in the larger centres and meet outside of school hours on a quarterly basis to discuss the teaching of their subjects. You could make a significant contribution to improving the professionalism of your teachers by successfully establishing a group of this kind for your subject in your district. ■

SAPA Conference Keynote Speakers

Marcus Conyers (USA)

Marcus is the author of 15 books on learning, leading, teaching, and the brain. He draws on 30 years of global leadership experience. He has coached school principals, business leaders and personnel from the US Navy Seals and Army Rangers. He is an international keynote speaker, consultant and passionate educator who regularly runs workshops on increasing student learning through brain-based leading. Marcus has spent 30 years in 35 countries to develop his BrainSMART approach to effective leading and teaching. He has appeared on more than 600 television and radio shows around the world. Every South African Principal should hear him speak!

Alan Davies (UK)

Executive Director of THRASS UK, Alan Davies is the Executive Director of THRASS UK and will address principals on the Literacy Dilemma. The THRASS phonics programme is enjoying considerable success in Africa where it has been welcomed as heralding the start of a new era in the teaching of English in Africa. THRASS is being used with children of all abilities from all types of backgrounds and in all types of schools: government schools such as Farm Schools in the Kwena Basin in Mpumalanga, township schools in Orange Farm, Johannesburg and prestigious independent schools in several provinces.

SAPA News

Press release provided by Dave de Korte of SAPA



SOUTH AFRICAN PRINCIPALS' ASSOCIATION NATIONAL CONFERENCE, 9 TO 11 SEPTEMBER 2010

From 9 to 11 September Cape Town will host the National Conference of the South African Principals' Association (SAPA).

The venue will be the acclaimed Cape Town International Conference Centre which links the city of Cape Town with the popular Waterfront.

The theme for the Conference is 'Critical Transformations for South African Schools'. If you are wondering what this topic means, then make a point of coming to the Conference. We have invited a host of local and international speakers who will be exploring and developing the theme. Through the Conference we aim to answer three questions: These are:

- Do we have the political will needed to make the critical transformations necessary to improve education in South Africa?
- Is there a passion for teaching in our schools?
- What must our school leaders know, do, appreciate and value to transform our schools?

This exciting Conference is open to all Principals and not only SAPA members. We would like every single principal in South Africa to be able to make those critical changes to his or her school that will contribute to transforming education in our country. We have heard enough about our low pass rates and high drop-out rates. In Cape Town in September we will commit ourselves to making a difference and to changing our educational outcomes from losing to winning, one school at a time.

South African Principals' Association



**Cape Town International Convention Centre
9-11 September 2010**

POLITICAL WILL - PASSION FOR TEACHING - PERFORMING LEADERS

Research

The 2010 World Cup – will schooling pay the price?

While hosting the 2010 World Cup is a great honour and provides wonderful opportunities for nation-building, the consequences of the long mid-year break on pupil performance may be dire.

Although the 2010 school year will include 195 school days which is within the range of 195 to 200 required by policy¹, it is certainly not be a typical school year if one looks at the number of school days in each term and the distribution of school holidays. While this in itself need not pose problems – although policy does recommend terms of equal length - the length of the mid-year break and the differing lengths of the school terms should raise concerns.

Evidence from research in the USA, where there is a break of approximately 12 weeks between the end of one academic year and the start of the next, suggests that the long summer break at the end of the school year has a negative effect on the academic progress of pupils. Of particular relevance to the South African situation is that this effect is most pronounced in pupils from socio-economically disadvantaged communities but has little impact on children from better-off middle class families. Part of the explanation for the differing effects has to do with how children from differing socio-economic classes spend their leisure time. In general, it was found that the children from middle class backgrounds are likely to be more closely supervised than are their more socio-economically disadvantaged peers and that they are more likely to be encouraged to spend their time in constructive education-related pursuits such as reading and visiting museums and libraries.

A summary of some of the main findings from the research into the impact of the long summer break on the academic progress of pupils is given on the adjacent page. These findings suggest that the longer five-week school holiday that has been imposed on schools because we are hosting the World Cup, is likely to have a negative impact on the academic progress of the majority of children given the socio-economic profile of our population. The fact that this long break is in the middle of the academic year is likely to exacerbate the problem - this is not the kind of World Cup legacy that education would hope for.

Of particular relevance to the South African situation is that this effect (Learning Loss) is most pronounced in pupils from socio-economically disadvantaged communities but has little impact on children from better-off middle class families.

Research undertaken in the USA on interventions that have been successfully used to counter some of the negative effects of their long summer break suggest that community-based “Out-of School Time” (OST) programmes can make a difference. These community-based programmes have been part of American community life since the second half of the 19th Century. The early programmes were initiated by philanthropic community members in an effort to support the large numbers of immigrants who were lured to the country at that time, many unable to speak English. They provided the children of the immigrants with basic tuition in English, some rudimentary health care, as well as with food and clothing where this was needed. The service was mostly provided by voluntary community groups – the forerunners of modern-day service organisations and NGOs. Over the next century changes in legislation saw an end to child labour and the introduction of compulsory education for children and by 1890 77% of children aged 5 – 17 were in school. The providers of these child-care programmes adapted to these changes by directing their efforts more towards the after-school care of the children of working-class parents and particularly to children with working mothers. Over the past few decades, however, the need for after-school care has increased substantially, driven by the growing number of families in which both parents work: a trend which has now become norm for many middle class families across the world.

At about the same time studies in adolescent behaviour, particularly those linking their social environment and levels of education to crime, began to attract the attention of politicians and the wider community. The after-school programmes were seen as a possible solution to the problems of increasing levels of anti-social behaviour and crime by disaffected young people. Private enterprise, always quick to respond to opportunities of this kind, began to identify the provision of specialist services (such as additional coaching) as a new market and out of this grew the wide array of extra-lesson and specialised coaching





programmes that are on offer in the USA today, as are they in many other parts of the world. The state responded in a similar manner attracted to the notion that OST programmes could be used to supplement some of the shortcomings of the public school system, and as a means of providing children with constructive alternatives to the social ills that are on offer in streets and malls of most big cities. It is interesting to consider the extent to which our own political leaders are thinking along the same lines, particularly in terms dealing with the large numbers of young adults who exit the schooling system and who are unable to find work. The recent proposal of Minister of Defence, Lindiwe Sisulu, for the establishment of a military-style training unit for young people is particularly relevant in this regard.

Recent research² initiated and funded by the Wallace Foundation and undertaken on its behalf by Rand Corporation provides some interesting data on the current levels of child care during OST and of the levels of participation in these programmes by children in the USA.

- Approximately 73% of children aged 5–14 with working mothers are cared for by a parent or relative, while about 17% participate in organized activities such as after-school programmes
- Approximately 11% of children of non-working mothers attend some sort of formal organization other than school.
- The greatest demand for these services is for younger children. At age five, 27% of children of working mothers are involved in organized activities outside the home but by age 14, this drops to 13%.
- 10.5% of children aged 5 – 14 of employed mothers are in unsupervised self-care for part of the day.
- 45% of children of 14 years of age are sometimes unsupervised. Interestingly, this figure increases with increasing income for whites but is lower for Hispanics and blacks.
- 28% of middle-school and high-school children reported being alone at home after school at least three out of 5 days in a typical school week.
- Nationally 59% of children aged 6 – 17 years participated in at least one extra-curricular activity (clubs, sports or lessons).
- While participation in sports and clubs declined overall between 1994 and 2000 for 12 – 17 year-olds, the participation of this group in (extra-) lessons increased from 19% - 26%.

Since 1994 the US government has become increasingly involved in the funding in OST programmes, with funds provided by both the Federal Government and by Individual states. Associated with this greater funding, however, had been increased regulation and a demand for more accountability in the spending of funds. The Wallace Foundation is one of the many organisations that funds OST programmes and it has tried to ascertain from the research³ that it has initiated the extent to which these kinds of programmes achieve their objectives. The finding from this research provides some useful guidelines for those who are involved in the design and operation of programmes of this kind, as well as those who fund them.

What the research showed

The findings from the research into programmes that delivered improved “youth outcomes” suggest that these programmes are most successful where:

- there was a clear mission
- there were high expectations and positive social norms
- there was a safe and healthy environment
- there was a supportive emotional climate
- the total enrolment in the programme was small
- there was a stable and appropriately trained staff contingent
- the content and pedagogy of the programme was appropriate, meeting the children’s needs and fulfilling the program’s mission, and where opportunities for individual engagement were provided for
- family members and community partners were involved in the programme
- there was frequent assessment

With the approaching long school holiday to accommodate the World Cup and the generally poor performance of our education system, it would seem sensible for the Provincial Education Departments, local government organisations, and NGOs involved with school-going children, to work together to set up programmes which will pull children from the streets and malls during the coming long winter holiday and to involve them in constructive, educative activities. Schools and District offices can take a lead in this regard by contacting their local Municipal Libraries, where these are available as well as local NGOs and Youth-based organisations, and encouraging them to run holiday programmes. There is also nothing to stop schools from running their own programmes, including

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Research

Holiday Learning Loss – lessons from research

The 12-week long Summer holiday break which is the tradition for schools in the USA, can set back the reading levels of some children by the equivalent of a month of schooling.

Public schools in the USA have a 9-month school year with a 12-week summer vacation which is long by international standards. The long summer break is rooted in the USA's economic history – it made it possible for children to assist with planting and harvesting at a time when the economy was essentially agriculture-based with 85% of Americans working in agriculture¹. Although there have been some attempts to change this historical format of the school calendar – currently less than 3% of Americans are involved in agriculture - it has remained the standard for most public schools.

A number of studies have been undertaken to determine the effect of the long break has on the learning of pupils. The findings from most of these studies are that the length of the break does have a detrimental effect on learning. In 1993 a national commission² was established to investigate the impact that the long vacation had on learning and one of the recommendations of the commission was that the school calendar be reviewed but not much came of this. A synthesis of the findings by Harris Cooper in an article published in the *ERIC Digest*³ includes the following:

- Holiday learning loss equalled at least one month of instruction meaning that on average, the test scores of pupils were at least one month lower when

they returned to school than they were when they left school at the start of the summer holiday;

- Holiday learning loss was more pronounced for Mathematical facts and spelling than for other tested skill areas. The explanation for this is that Mathematical computation (as opposed to concepts) and spelling, are skills that require factual and procedural knowledge which benefit from regular practice, while mathematical problem-solving and reading comprehension are more conceptually based and are less affected by lack of practice.
- Holiday learning loss was more pronounced overall for Mathematics than for reading;
- Gender, ethnicity and IQ did not appear to have significant influence on holiday learning loss;
- The socio-economic circumstances of families does not influence holiday learning loss in Mathematics but does influence learning loss in reading, and these differences were substantial.
- The reading levels of middle class children are not affected by the long holiday, with some research suggesting that their reading levels actually improved. The reading levels of children from disadvantaged homes, however, did show some level

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Country	Weeks of school	Hours of school/year Age 9	Hours of school/year Age 13	% Lang (Mother Tongue)	% Maths	TIMMS (Maths)	PRLS (Reading)
Australia	40	986	1023	12%	12%	516 (14)	-
India	42	1051	1176	25%	14%	-	-
Indonesia	44	1064	1323	16%	16%	-	-
Italy	34	1020	1020	23%	10%	507 (16)	551 (8)
Japan	35	761	875	14%	12%	568 (4)	-
New Zealand	39	985	930	17%	16%	492 (23)	532 (24)
Russia	43	630	998	24%	14%	544 (6)	565 (1)
Tunisia	33	960	900	17%	14%	327 (33)	-
USA	40	-	-	17%	16%	529 (11)	540 (17)

This table shows the following data for the listed countries: Weeks of school per year; Hours of instruction per year for 9 year-olds and 13 year-olds; % of time devoted to mother tongue instruction in primary school; % of time devoted to Mathematics instruction in primary school; Score and ranking (in brackets) for the county in the most recent TIMMS comparative study for Mathematics Achievement; Score and ranking (in brackets) in the most recent PRLS comparative study for Reading Achievement.

Literacy

Why reading proficiency by the end of Grade 3 matters

Up to the end of Grade 3 children learn to read; from Grade 4 onwards they need to read to learn. Without the one, the other becomes impossible.

In a special report¹ on the importance of reading proficiency by the end of Grade 3 published by Kids Count², a private charitable organisation dedicated to helping build a better future for disadvantaged children in the USA, the authors make 4 recommendations about what needs to be done to improve the reading proficiency levels of Grade 4 pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds.

What is particularly interesting about this report is that its findings and suggested solutions may be relevant to the kinds of problems that we face in this country in terms of the literacy development of children during their early years at school. Because funding for the study was provided by the Annie E Casey Foundation which concerns itself with the needs of disadvantaged children in the USA, its focus was on the proficiency levels of children who fall into this group. What is startling from a South African perspective is how poor the literacy levels of this age group are in the USA. We have provided some of the results from this report in the adjacent box as evidence of this.

The purpose of this study was to pull together the findings from the research into the literacy levels of children from disadvantaged backgrounds and to use these findings to develop a model which could be used to improve the performance of pupils at school, district and state level.

The findings and recommendations are pertinent and not dissimilar to challenges that we face in this country.

Five Essential Components of Reading Instruction

The five essential components of reading listed below were formulated by a panel of reading experts from the USA who were asked to gather evidence from research and other available sources to determine the most effective approaches to teaching children to read. The list was first published in 2000.

According to the panel, the best reading instruction programmes include these 5 elements:

- 1 Phonemic awareness – the ability to manipulate sounds in words
- 2 Phonics – the knowledge of the relationships between written letters and sounds
- 3 Vocabulary – understanding the meaning of words in reading and in written and spoken language
- 4 Fluency – the ability to read rapidly
- 5 Comprehension – the ability to gain meaning while reading.

Recommendation 1

This recommendation dealt with the need to co-ordinate the efforts of all state agencies that deal with children from birth to the end of Grade 3. It quite rightly emphasises the need for improved health-care and nutrition during a child's first years of life. It stressed the need for better coordination of state agencies such as the departments of health, social welfare and

education in ensuring the children reach Grade 3 without having suffered from any major avoidable physical, social, cognitive or emotional developmental delays

Recommendation 2

This recommendation deals with the contribution that parents and care-givers can make to the cognitive and language development of pre-school children. It emphasises the need to provide parents and care-givers of pre-school children with the knowledge and wherewithal to encourage proper language development in children of this age. It makes the point that there is no substitute for the contribution that the parents or primary care-giver can make to a child's early linguistic development

by conversing with them and reading to them from an early age. Pre-schools, after-care centres and NGOs can play an important role in this regard by helping parents to develop their parenting skills and by encouraging them to read to their children. They can also assist by making appropriate resources such as picture and story books available to parents who cannot afford them.

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Recommendation 3

This recommendation focuses on the need to improve the quality of schools that serve the poor. It stresses the need for more rigorous state standards and the need for interventions which can demonstrate measurable, results-driven improvements in pupil performance. One way to achieve this, they suggest, is by placing the best teachers in schools where they are needed most. Included in the suggestions is the need for better alignment of what is taught in pre-schools and early childhood centres and the curriculum used in the first three years of primary school.

Recommendation 4

This recommendation deals with two issues which have been identified as being major contributors to the underperformance of pupils from low-income families. The two factors are chronic absenteeism and summer learning loss. Research suggests that many parents of low-income families do not appreciate the negative impact that frequent absence has on the language development of children in their early school years and for this reason are less likely to insist that their children attend school regularly. The recommendation includes the suggestion that community-based organisations be used to inform parents of the need for regular school attendance and that schools be more proactive in approaching parents when a child is chronically absent.

Summer Learning Loss

Summer learning loss relates to the setback, particularly in the literacy levels of children from low-income families, that occurs as a result of the long summer break, which in the USA separates one academic year from the next. It is a break of approximately 12 weeks. Research shows that although most children make similar gains during the course of the school year, children from low income homes suffer a set-back in reading of up to two months during the long summer break, while their better peers from middle-income families make slight gains. For more on the effects of summer learning loss turn to the article on page 8 of this issue. ■

References

¹ The Annie E. Casey Foundation, Early Warning: The importance of Reading Proficiency by the End of Grade 3.

² Kids Count is funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, a private charitable organisation dedicated to helping build a better future for disadvantaged children in the USA. For more information go to datacenter.kidscount.org

SM&L Comment

This research-based report produced by *Kids Count* and which is featured elsewhere on this page, makes it abundantly clear just why it is so important that children are able to read at the appropriate level by the end of Grade 3. They emphasise the point that up to the end of Grade 3 – the end of the Foundation Phase in our system of schooling - most children are learning to read, while from Grade 4 onwards children will be reading to learn. It appears to be a subtle point yet it has vital significance for understanding the consequences for those children who are not sufficiently proficient readers by the end of Grade 3. Research done by the Reading Foundation, which is referred to in the report, suggests that up to half of the printed Grade 4 curriculum is incomprehensible to those children who are not able to read at the appropriate level for their grade. Similar research done by Yale University found that children who are poor readers in the third grade remain poor readers in high school. Other research has found that children who are poor readers are likely to have more behavioural and social problems in higher grades than their more literate peers.

The council found that academic success as defined by “graduation” (passing) at the end of high school can be predicted with reasonable accuracy by knowing a child’s reading skill at the end of Grade 3

Studies done by the National Research Council¹, also in the USA, provide further evidence of the massive impact that the failure of children to reach an acceptable level of reading proficiency by the end of Grade 3 has on their ability to succeed at school. The council found that academic success as defined by “graduation” (passing) at the end of high school can be predicted with reasonable accuracy by knowing a child’s reading skill at the end of Grade 3; and that unless the child is at least a moderately skilled reader by the end of his/her Grade 3 year, he/she is unlikely to pass at the end of their high school career. This is a startling assertion and could well explain the persistently high failure rate of this country’s Grade 12s in our NSC examinations and the difficulty that we are having in improving these pass rates. Could it be that our underperforming high schools, in their efforts to improve their NSC results, are fighting a battle that cannot be won because the majority of their intake is children whose reading levels are insufficient to deal with the demands of the high school curriculum? Evidence from the Grade 3 and 6





systemic assessments in literacy and numeracy seems to support this contention. While there has been some small improvement in the overall literacy results at Grade 3 level over the past few years, the results at Grade 6 level remain stuck.

Efforts to improve the system may require an approach that is different from the present system. One option may be for primary schools with a high proportion of pupils who have not reached the appropriate literacy levels by the end of Grade 3 to continue with basic literacy coaching into the intermediate phase. This could help ensure that greater numbers of pupils enter the GET phase of schooling with age-appropriate reading skills. In a similar vein, high schools with low NSC pass rates could shift their focus from the Grade 12 year – which is where most of these schools are directing their efforts at present - to developing ways of improving the reading and comprehension skills of pupils in Grades 8 and 9. This approach may prove to be a better way of ensuring that more pupils can master the texts that are such an essential element of the teaching and learning process in high schools. ■

Reference

¹ National Research Council, *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* (National Academy Press, Washington DC, 1998)

The 2010 World cup - will schooling pay the price?

[Continued from page 7](#)

extra-lessons in key subjects for Grade 12s and additional literacy, numeracy, language and Mathematics classes for the other grades. Simply providing Grade 12s with a quiet place to study would help, as would providing pupils in the junior grades with access to the school library or with a regular daily story hour read from age-appropriate books that they may enjoy. All this is not to detract from the national pride and excitement that our hosting of the World Cup will bring; it is simply to ensure that the post-World Cup hangover does not take the form of poor performance and high failure rates in our schools. ■

References

¹ The "National School Policy for Designing School Calendars for Ordinary Public Schools in South Africa", was published in Government Gazette No. 20945 of 1 March 2000 (GG 27 of 2000)

² Susan Bodilly and Megan K. Beckett, *Making Out of School Time Matter: Evidence for an Action Agenda*, (Rand Corporation, Santa Monica, 2005)

³ Ibid.

Holiday Learning Loss

[Continued from page 8](#)

of reading level as a result of the long break.

- The author of the article suggests 3 possible remedies for the learning set-back resulting from the 12 week holiday break:

- Extending the school year – the average school year in the USA is 175 to 180 days which compares unfavourably with the school year of other developed nations. Japan apparently has a school year of 240 school days. (There is a table on page 8 which provides comparative data showing the number of school weeks and teaching hours for a sample of developed and developing nations. Ed.)

- “Summer School” – there is good evidence from research demonstrating the positive benefits of participation in holiday programmes which provide remedial, accelerated and enrichment learning opportunities. Although all pupils were shown to have benefitted from these programmes, the benefits were greatest for children from middle-class homes. Remedial programmes were shown to be most beneficial when they involved small numbers and were individualised. Remedial Mathematics programmes produced greater gains than remedial reading programmes and parental involvement in the programmes was found to be beneficial. Interestingly, although all pupils were shown to benefit from these programmes, those that benefitted most were pupils in the lower grades of primary school and pupils in secondary school.

- Modifying the school calendar – this would involve reducing the length of the holiday without lengthening the school year. The proposed modification to the academic year established more and shorter breaks. The results from schools and school districts which made the modifications, however, showed no significant difference from the traditional school year with a 12-week summer break. Evidence from research on lengthening the school year suggest that there are benefits in terms of pupil outcomes but only if the length of the school year is increased fairly substantially. One group of researchers suggest that the school year would need to be extended by 35 days to achieve significant benefits! ■

References

¹ Harris Cooper, *Summer Learning Loss: The Problem and Some Solutions*, ERIC Digest May 2003.

² National Education Commission on Time and Learning (NECTL, 1993)

³ Ibid.



interpreted, this data can also provide useful indicators about quality of the assessment task or examination itself, about the quality and consistency of the marking and about the extent to which the quality of teaching may have influenced the results of different class groups. Examples of some of the kinds of inferences that can be drawn are given in the following examples:

- A good spread of marks across all of the rating code bands indicates that the test or examination catered for a wide range of candidates, while a narrow range of marks and marks clustered in just two or three code bands suggests that the examination questions or assessment tasks were mostly of a similar standard and did not differentiate sufficiently between stronger and weaker pupils. It may also suggest that the pupil group that is tested are relatively homogeneous in terms of their academic ability.
- If pupils from some classes generally do better than those from other classes, questions need to be asked about how pupils are grouped – the results may be a result of the deliberate streaming of classes, or it may be that a teacher is at fault. The teacher may not have covered all of the work that was required for the test, or may have not been sufficiently thorough in her teaching and testing.

Subjects and learning areas should also be compared across the Grade. Generally, one should expect subject averages and code distributions to be fairly similar from subject to subject, unless there are specific reasons for there to be differences. One example of this would be where weaker pupils are forced to take subjects which are more suited to their abilities. The averages and code distributions of Mathematics and Mathematical Literacy may be different for this reason. On the other hand, one would expect the averages and code distributions of Mathematics and Physical Sciences to be similar because both make demands on pupils' numeracy skills. Primary schools need to take note of the fact that the DBE's systemic evaluation test of literacy and numeracy Grades 3 and 6 shows that, in general, pupils perform better in literacy than in numeracy. This needs to be taken into account when reviewing the results of these subjects within the school.

Perhaps the most important value of subject averages and code distributions is that they provide the principal and his/her staff with specific data which can form the basis for discussion about academic performance: this discussion can be used to identify problems and to develop strategies for improvement. In the best performing schools, this kind of discussion

happens all the time but it is our experience that in underperforming schools it is mostly absent. This difference may be one of the keys to unlocking some of the secrets of the persistent underperformance of so many of our public schools. ■

From Parliament

Vacant principal's posts

The inability or unwillingness of Provincial Education Departments to make permanent appointments of principals at schools where the post is vacant should be a matter of serious concern for the DBE and one which needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency. The failure of some PEDs to ensure that permanent appointments are made to vacant principals post in an expeditious manner was made abundantly clear in the DBE's written response to a question put to the Minister through the parliamentary processes by Mr James Lorimer of the DA¹. The questions to the minister were the following:

- 1 (a) Which schools in each province have vacant principal's posts and (b) since what date has each of these posts been vacant;
- 2 Whether each of these schools has an acting principal in place; if not, why not; if so, when was every acting principal appointed;
- 3 What is the average length of time in each province that principals' posts have remain (a) unfilled and (b) unfilled by a permanent appointment?

The Minister, in her written response, was only able to provide detailed data from 4 of the provinces (Gauteng, Limpopo, North West and Western Cape). Gauteng listed 66 vacant posts, North West listed 113, and the Western Cape and Limpopo both listed 88 vacancies. All four provinces indicated that an acting principal is appointed immediately a post become vacant and that posts are normally filled by permanent appointees within between 6 and 9 months of the post becoming vacant.

What should be of grave concern to the Minister is the inability of 5 of our 9 provinces to provide this kind of information in response to her request. If they are unable to provide this kind of basic data within a reasonable timeframe to their Minister, one has to question their ability to service the needs of their schools. ■

References

¹ Internal question paper 6: 2010

School Improvement Strategies

Your school year-plan – not just a planning tool

A school year-plan should be more than just a calendar of events. Properly used, it becomes a road map for the unfolding year, providing direction, early warning of challenges ahead and a means of monitoring and measuring progress.

Recently, while working with the principal and Senior Management Team who are looking to improve their school's results we had reason to talk about the school Year-plan. The discussion was initiated when questions about the dates and timing of the approaching mid-year examinations elicited some confusion and disagreement about the dates on which the coming examinations were to begin and end. It turned out that there was indeed a Year-plan which the principal had prepared and distributed to all members of staff at the start of the school year but that it was not on public display in the staffroom and was seldom referred to when decisions were taken. The message from this discussion was clear – the school Year-plan is not just a planning instrument; it is also an important management and communication tool.

If properly used, a school Year-plan can serve a number of important purposes:

- It promotes shared decision-making provided decisions about the dates and timing of events and deadlines are based on a consultative process involving the SMT and all members of staff;
- It encourages proper systematic long-term thinking, ensuring that planning is proactive and thoughtful and not reactive and crisis driven;
- It is an important communication tool that provides all members of the school community with the critical information that they need to plan ahead and to manage their daily duties. This pre-supposes, however, that the Year-plan is widely distributed and regularly updated where this is needed.
- It increases levels of accountability because people who are sufficiently forewarned of coming events and deadlines are more likely to meet their obligations and can be taken to task if they fail to do so.

The following checklist and suggestions are designed to help ensure that your school year-plan contributes to the operational effectiveness of your school.

Dates and deadlines checklist

Use this to ensure that the most important dates and deadlines of the academic year are listed on the Year-plan.

Term 1

- Date on which school opens for teachers.
- Date on which school opens for pupils.
- Dates and deadlines for collection and submission of all statistical and other returns required by DBE and/or your PED.
- Date of first scheduled SMT meeting for the year.
- Dates and times of all formally constituted SMT meetings for the year. Except in the case of small schools with a staff of less than 10, the SMT should meet for at least 30 min. either weekly or fortnightly.
- Dates and times of all formally constituted meetings of subject/ learning area/ phase heads with their subject/learning area/ phase teams if these meetings are not built into the school timetable. Meetings of subject teams, learning area teams and phase teams should take place weekly if the team consists of 3 or more members.
- Dates and times of all formally-constituted staff meetings. Staff meetings should take place weekly. Set aside at least 30 minutes for these meetings unless your school operates on a system where the staff meets at the start of the school day for notices and briefings, in which case these meetings can be scheduled at fortnightly intervals.
- Dates and times of meetings of the SGB and of formally-constituted SGB sub-committees. The SGB is required by law to meet at least once each term and the Finance sub-committee of the SGB must meet at least once each month. The agenda for meetings of the SGB (and its sub-committees) should be sent out at least 1 week before the date of every scheduled meeting. These dates can also be entered on the school calendar as a reminder to those who must prepare and distribute the agendas for these meetings.





- The dates and times when marks must be handed in preparation for the processing and collating of first term reports.
- The date of the staff meeting at which the term marks of pupils will be discussed. For schools with large numbers of pupils it may be necessary to schedule more than one meeting.
- The deadline (date and time) for the completion of reports.
- The date and time of the meeting when parents can meet teachers to discuss their child's school report.
- Date on which the school closes for the term and the closing time.

Terms 2 – 4

The same pattern as used in term 1 should be adhered to for terms 2 – 4 except that you will need to add the following:

- Date on which school opens for pupils.
- The starting and ending dates of the mid-year and final examinations.
- The starting and ending dates of the third term examinations for Grade 12s.
- Examinations: For each examination be sure to include the following dates, deadlines and times:
 - The date by which the examination timetable must be finalised and approved by the principal and SMT.
 - The date by which examination question papers and memoranda must be set and checked by subject heads.
 - The date by which examination question papers must be printed, stapled and stored ready for distribution on the days on which the papers are to be written.
 - The date by which the invigilation timetable for the examination must be completed and approved by the principal/ SMT.
 - The date by which the marking of all scripts must be completed.
 - The date by which all subject mark sheets must be completed and handed in for processing.
 - The date by which subject examination statistics (Grade average and code distribution for each subject and grade) must be submitted for approval.
 - The deadline for the completion and checking

of quarterly reports to parents.

- The deadline for the signing of the quarterly reports to parents.
- The date on which reports will be distributed or posted to parents.
- The date on which school closes for pupils.
- The date on which school closes for teachers.

Requirements in terms of National Policy

Events which are required to take place in terms of National or Provincial Education policy should be included in the Year-plan. These include:

- The date and time of the meeting at which the SGB must approve the school's budget for the following year.
- The date by which the notice to parents must be distributed informing them of the date of the meeting at which the school's budget and proposed fees for the following year will be presented for approval. (Policy requires that parents receive notification of this meeting at least 40 days before the date of the meeting.)
- The date and time of the meeting at which the SGB will present the budget and school fees for the following year to the parents for their approval.

Other events

In addition to the above, the Year-plan should also include the dates and times of any major events which are planned for the year. These would include social and fund-raising events such as a fête, prize-giving, matric dance and farewell functions for Grade 7s and Grade 12s who are about to leave school; cultural and sporting events such as a school play, choir festival or derby day; as well as planned excursions and tours.

Once the Year-plan has been drawn up, it needs to be submitted to the SMT and SGB for review and approval. This is to ensure that problem areas can be identified before the plan is finalised and that the final plan has the support and approval of these two important groups.

Using the plan to communicate with teachers, the SGB and parents

All teachers should be issued with a list of all of the dates and deadlines listed on the Year-plan which will affect them, preferably before the start of the academic year. The alternative is to issue it to them when they meet for the first time as a group on the first day of the school year. The same would apply to the SGB. For parents it is usually better to send out a list of important

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The essential reference books for anyone involved in managing a school ...

The Handbook of School Management

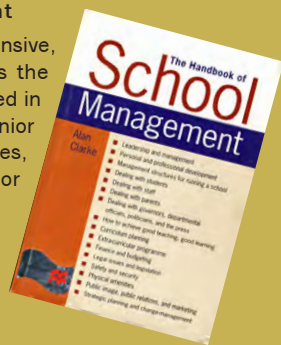
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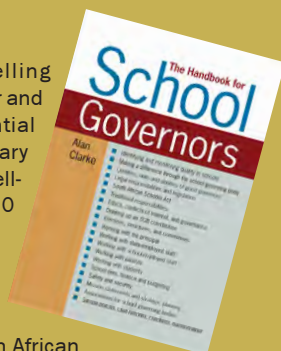
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dates on a quarterly basis and to distribute this, for the quarter ahead, with their child's school report at the end of each quarter.

Posting a large copy of the Year-plan prominently in the staff room so that staff can consult it on a daily basis is a visual reminder to them of the need to plan ahead. You can assist them further in this regard by setting aside a separate area next to the Year-plan which can be used to list coming events and looming deadlines. One approach used by many schools is to divide the area on the notice board set aside for the Year-plan into 4 parts with the headings: "Today", "This Week", "The Term Ahead" and "Plan Ahead". Daily notices and reminders can then be listed under the "Today" heading, important events and looming deadlines can be listed under the "This Week" heading, the sections of the year-plan covering the remaining weeks of the term can be posted under the "The Term Ahead" heading, and the rest of the Year-plan can be posted under the "Plan Ahead" heading.

A school Year-plan is an important planning tool but the careful planning that may have gone into preparing the Year-plan is likely to have little impact on the efficiency of the school if the dates and deadlines it contains are not communicated to staff and parents on a regular basis. Equally important in getting things done is the need to insist that deadlines are met and events take place according to the dates and times scheduled on the year-plan. ■

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