

Towards a new education agenda

Rethink the role of the community school, writes **Al Witten**

A good deal of healthy public debate revolves around what needs to be done to improve the quality of schooling in South Africa. This is important, as few other initiatives have the potential to be as pivotal to the transformation of South African society as the systematic improvement of schools. In rekindling the debate I would like to revisit an old concept for enhancing the educational experiences of children and young people in South Africa — the simple, yet powerful concept of the community school.

Any efforts to improve schools — especially many of the schools serving our townships and rural communities — must take into consideration the forces that shape the realities of schooling and influence the teaching and learning outcomes. Persistent poverty and inequality in our society affect the life experiences and chances of young people and their families, threaten the stability of communities and undermine their potential to participate as active citizens in the country's growth.

We are aware of many of the problems related to these socioeconomic conditions. They include, among others, ill-health, fragmentation of the family, poor school attendance and discipline problems, increased school drop out rate, psychosocial trauma and an increase in the number of orphans attending school.

Schools, on their own, are unlikely to deal effectively with these challenges. What is needed is a broader, bolder and more integrated approach to school improvement. This will reconnect the school to its community and other stakeholders in multiple initiatives aimed at engaging the challenges that confront learners and their families, while strengthening the instructional (teaching and learning) core.

A broader approach to school improvement places the school at the centre and focuses on addressing the internal and external challenges to the core functions of teaching and learning. The community school is connected to and works with parents and other education stakeholders to identify the challenges and to design and implement interventions to address them. These stakeholder groups can include the local clinic, businesses, religious organisations, libraries, civic groups and universities.

Of course, the role of the state — at provincial and national levels — is crucial to support and implement such an approach. It should involve collaboration at the intra- and inter-ministerial levels where networked structures within the education department are connected to other ministries, such as health and social services, to deliver more coordinated services to schools and the communities they serve.

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Persistent poverty and inequality in our society affect the life experiences and chances of young people and their families, threaten the stability of communities and undermine their potential to participate as active citizens in the country's growth. Photos: David Harrison and Sapa

ing an enabling environment that allows the community school to be established. Through a consultative process, it can develop policy frameworks that facilitate cross-sector collaboration. It should also provide resources to assist the community school to achieve its improvement goals.

Schools can collaborate with one or more of the stakeholder groups to develop projects that range from giving direct support to learners and teachers, such as an after-school mathematics enrichment programme run by a university or NGO, to working with parents and the local clinic to provide health services to learners.

It is important for these projects to be clearly identified, grounded in the real context of the school and community and aligned to the improvement goals of the school. In addition, the projects should not be regarded as "add-ons", hovering on the periphery of schooling. Instead, they should be integrated into the school's improvement strategy — that coherent set of actions that connects the school's organisational structures, policies, resources and culture to the changes that need to be made.

Our public schools, especially those serving townships and rural communities, have the potential to become thriving community schools. There are a number of factors that favour this. First, schools, as with religious and other civic organisations, are sites of social cohesion in many communities. They bring young people, parents and other stakeholders together around the educational enterprise. Schools are also shared public spaces that are used by the community for purposes other than education, such as church services and community meetings and events. The institutional connections that schools have to these groups

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hold significant potential for future collaboration.

Another factor that supports the community school is that children and older learners spend much of their waking time in school. In this setting they become more accessible to external groups, which can provide them and their families with support and services, such as after-school activities, tutoring programmes, health projects and parent workshops and activities.

Finally, schools have access to officials from across the public service spectrum (such as education, health and social services) that should form part of a comprehensive school improvement strategy involving multiple sectors of society.

While there are often negative public perceptions about the state of schooling in the country, any approach to create the community school should be asset-based and tap into the hopes and aspirations, as well as the creativity and energy, of the school and community.

Implementing community schools can have a number of benefits for society. Most importantly, it focuses on educating the whole child. This not only involves direct efforts to improve teaching and learning, such



as enhancing the qualifications and skills of teachers, but also on those issues that affect learners' quality of life and wellbeing. It means that sport and cultural activities, nutrition, health, counselling and social support must be built into the functions of schools with clear connections being made between a healthy mind, healthy body and healthy community.

The community school also has a strong developmental orientation. Schools can be centres that serve broader community needs, such as providing literacy and skills training for unemployed parents and other community members. They can facilitate projects that lead to income generation for parents. School-based micro enterprises that draw on the strengths and expertise of the community, such as a carpentry shop, a school uniform and clothes manufacturer and an organic vegetable and herb gardening project, help to build an entrepreneurial base in the community that can become self-sustaining over time.

Another benefit of the community school is that it has much to contribute in terms of knowledge generation aimed at solving local problems. This knowledge is context-specific and is generated through interactive discussions between school leaders and teachers, community members, learners and other stakeholder groups. These interactions are empowering because they allow the community "voice" to emerge when formulating solutions to some of the challenges that confront the community.

Community schools help learners develop global competencies by not only teaching the basic skills of reading, writing and mathematics (a core area of school improvement), but also by encouraging creative thinking and problem-solving through tackling local problems.

When learners are engaged in an environmental project that involves the design of a clean and safe water reticulation and sanitation system, or when they study the business model of a local micro enterprise, they are exposed to applied skills and professional forms of knowledge that are essential to the global world of work.

Efforts to improve the functions of schools in isolation from the broader social transformation of society will, at best, yield short-term, limited results. It is important therefore that we give thoughtful consideration to some of the options being put on the table. The challenges we face as we seek to move the education system in a north-easterly direction on the improvement graph are complex and multifaceted and we should be careful not to adopt a "one-size-fits-all" or an "anything goes" approach to dealing with them. Instead we need flexible strategies that are grounded in theory and research and draw on best practices. We also need an enabling policy and resource environment in which to do this work.

It is time for us to revisit the old notion of the community school and rethink the role of the school and of leadership at the school, district and national levels. The community school was the defining idea of "Peoples' Education", which contained the blueprint for an alternative education system in South Africa that would help learners develop critical thinking skills and prepare them for full participation in the social, economic, political and cultural spheres of the country.

Schools remain one of the few intact social institutions in many of South Africa's urban and rural communities and their potential to improve learning and make significant contributions to community improvement remains untapped. What is needed is the collective will of all stakeholders — from government ministries to communities and schools — to rekindle the powerful notion of schools that are integrated into a broad network of support for learners and their families. This will breathe new life into the African adage: "... it takes a whole village to raise a child ..."

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