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Improving education in South Africa

The Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS), recently hosted a forum discussion that outlined the state of education in Gauteng.

Professor Nick Binedell, dean at GIBS opened the discussion by highlighting the fact that education is one of the greatest issues of our time, both in South Africa and globally. "Education is central to a nation's health and wellbeing and in South Africa this critical pillar has certainly been under the spotlight." said Professor Binedell.

An inherited set of circumstances

Barbara Creecy, MEC for education in South Africa, opened by reading a number of statistics from a 1994 government document which showed the dire situation of education in our country that was inherited by the post-apartheid government. At this time, the number of school days missed by learners as well as the number of schools without electricity and water was high and the number of adult South Africans with a matric was low. The government had to redress the level of financing to create one education department (at that time there were 17) and ensure that the budget was equitably split. Creecy noted her satisfaction at the early changes that were undertaken by noting the fact that those first 15 year's managed to do what took Western Europe and America 100 years.

Learner related and non-learner related challenges

Creecy went on to discuss that even though the percentage of the population with a matric certificate increased, other issues began to surface. In 2009 one of the biggest challenges was to address the fact that individuals coming out of the schooling system were not able to meet the demands of the working economy and many who were not working were essentially wasted human capital. Creecy highlighted the nature of the problem as two-fold: learning related factors and non-learning related factors. The former relating to schools not covering the full curriculum, educators not feeling equipped to teach the full curriculum and a lack of tools for principals to check on the status of the curriculum in their schools. The non-learning related factors included tardiness of students, lack of safety at schools, poor levels of hygiene and infrastructure and issues such as substance abuse and guns and knives in schools.

Steps to remediation

During this time strategies were needed to combat both sets of problems and a range of tactics were developed in order to improve the quality of the teachers, school management and learners. Standardised testing was introduced, a very important milestone as prior to the Annual National Assessment (ANA) tests, there was no single way of testing the school system other than matric exams which did not allow for early diagnosis of a problem and therefore did not facilitate any form of remediation. During this time over 100 schools were also built and measures were introduced to help learners with transport, food and safety.

"With all of this in mind – to what extent have we achieved our goals?" asked Creecy. She then returned to some statistics noting the improvement of grade three learners passing the ANA tests and the increased pass rate in maths and science. "I am satisfied that we have done a lot for schools in rural areas. Top Gauteng matric learner for 2013, Praise Ndebele, from a no-fee school in the impoverished Ivory Park township, is testament to that. We have showed that huge improvements can be made in a short space of time and there is still more to be done. I believe that that it is possible to transform our education system," said Creecy. She concluded by saying that future plans to reform the education system should place focus on the softer elements such as increased funds for art and culture and sporting activities.

What can businesses do to contribute?

The points raised by the MEC show that there is still room for more improvement, so the question remains: How can business contribute to the challenges faced by our education system?

Panel member, Louise Van Rhyn, from Partners for Possibility (PfP), provides a creative solution to many of the issues. Van Rhyn founded PfP in 2010 to provide a co-action, co-learning partnership between school principals and business leaders, enabling social cohesion through partnerships, and empowering principals to become change leaders in their schools and communities. The programme facilitates cross-sectoral reciprocal partnerships between business, government and the social sector.

Bob Head, acting CFO at SARS and one of the panel members at the forum, strongly advocates the PfP initiative with which he is also affiliated and notes that his participation consistently leaves him humbled by the teachers and principals who do such amazing things in their schools. Jane Tsharane, principal at Makgatho Primary School shared how helpful the programme has been to her: "All school principals should have a principal partner, as the contributions they make in terms of time, skills and knowledge are invaluable".

Yusuf Ambramjee from Lead SA, who was also a panellist at the discussion, stressed his belief that as a country we need to start prioritising our problems and collectively join hands to help the issues. Supporting initiatives like PfP and encouraging small business initiatives where civil society and business can partner to make a difference is a great start to addressing some of the challenges.

Problems are complex but hope remains

According to Tshepo Motsepe, co-head of Equal Education in Gauteng, "There are many existing issues that still contribute to the inequalities in our education system. The ratio of children and teachers in classrooms, as well as unequal distribution of money are huge concerns. Active citizenship and involvement from business is needed to increase the significant change and improvement of the conditions at schools in rural areas."

Creecy believes that the progress made thus far shows that there is in fact stability in the system. This opens the door for new partnership opportunities for those who are willing to make appropriate contributions. She believes that the government has done a lot to address the problems in our education system but a lot more still needs to be done. "Having a good heart is a beginning but it can't be the end" says Creecy. "There is no better cause you can give your time to than education".

