Linking principals with business

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School principals in the Western Cape will benefit from a community upliftment initiative aimed at equipping them with leadership and management skills to deal with a range of challenges they encounter at schools.

Called the Community of Learning Principals (Colp), the initiative is a product of a partnership between the faculty of economic and management sciences at the University of the Western Cape, the South African Principals' Association and leadership development NGO Symphonia for South Africa.

The initiative targets principals because they are seen as catalysts to drive social change and are better placed to "strengthen the fabric of South African society". The principals will benefit by networking with experienced academics, business and community leaders during workshops convened at regular intervals.

The official launch of the initiative took place early last month at the university and attracted more than 100 principals.

Lindi Kamffer, faculty manager and one of the driving forces behind Colp, said the initiative came about after several principals asked to be trained in business-related skills. These, she said, range from how to position and market their schools to leadership and policy development and how to network with the business community.

Kamffer said Symphonia for South Africa, which has designed school-based programmes, received similar calls for training from principals.

Principals as educational managers are "strategically placed" to play a pivotal role in "building character, shaping personality and fostering core [social] values". Schools are the critical centre of communities and are in a good position to help to address the social challenges the country faces, said Kamffer.

After the launch, the organisers would study feedback from the principals and plan for another round of interactions. Kamffer said the university would continue to host future workshops and also help with facilitations.

Her counterpart from Symphonia for South Africa, Louise van Rhyn, said the NGO's involvement in the initiative resonates with its broader mission as a non-government organisation, which is to mobilise citizens to take responsibility in raising children. "It is not a principal's responsibility but ours as well. We believe we should break the monotony of always putting the blame on the principals by giving support to them," said Van Rhyn.

Children spend about 20% of their time at school and 80% in the community, either in the street or at home. "As society, we always focus on the 20%. Actually, 80% is critical for the 20% to work. Our task as communities and citizens is to help our kids achieve this by playing an active part in their education," she said.

The idea is not to empower the principals alone but also to make sure other key players such as

school governing bodies function optimally. Van Rhyn said that more workshops would be convened in the future to enable principals to network, share experiences and interact with experts and representatives of the business community.

Terrence Klaasen, principal of Fairmount Secondary School in Grassy Park, Western Cape, said: "I am excited with the launch because it provides principals with a voice. It creates a forum for us to interact and network among ourselves but, more importantly, with the business community."

He said creating links with the business community would help principals to gain essential technical skills to better serve the communities in which their schools are based.

His words were echoed by Mark Williams, principal of Macassar Primary School. "Our schools are situated in what is called 'high-poverty setting' and operate under very difficult conditions. We really need the kind of skills that help us make the best of our situation," he said, adding that the area he particularly needs help in is how to engage with business.

Source: Mail & Guardian Online
Web Address: http://mg.co.za/article/2011-07-20-linking-principals-with-business