

Principals welcome assistance from community focused partnership

Under pressure from Government to achieve better Grade 12 results with a limited amount of funding, and under pressure from cash-strapped parents who also want to see their children well-educated, Principals are caught in a vice-grip of expectations to deliver. While managing a tight budget they also have to provide leadership for both teachers and learners, negotiate with the School Governing Body, maintain discipline and deflect or respond to numerous societal influences which fluctuate depending on the community the school is situated in.

Complicating the situation is the fact that Principals take on the position, initially at least, without receiving any specialised training in running and managing a school.

It is thus hardly surprising that a programme to assist Principals – at no charge – by creating a platform upon which to engage with both other Principals and leaders of enterprise and academia, has been enthusiastically welcomed by those at the helm of the complex institution known as the school.

For many Principals, it is the first tangible sign of sustainable practical and morale support they have encountered.

The Community of Learning Principals (COLP) initiative which has evolved through a partnership between the University of the Western Cape's Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences (EMS), Symphonia for South Africa and MySchool MyVillage MyPlanet, with support from the South African Principals Association, is now in its second year of operation and rapidly gathering momentum.

To support the CoLP initiative, MySchool MyVillage MyPlanet, has committed to an official sponsor for 2012 by donating R120 000 to ensure the year's events can be offered, free of charge, to local school Principals and their deputies.

"MySchool MyVillage MyPlanet acknowledges that schools form the heart of communities. Principals are the leaders we rely on to set the tone and lead the way for schools to perform in all fields: academically and socially. We have to provide them with tools and opportunities. For this reason we want to extend our hand of support in building up our society from grass roots level," comments Pieter Twine, MySchool General Manager."

The impetus of the programme, which has been enthusiastically received by Principals of schools in and around Cape Town where it is situated, came from discussions between the not-for-profit organisational change practice Symphonia, and UWC.

UWC's EMS faculty manager Lindi Kamffer said Symphonia had found that Principals were, unsurprisingly perhaps, very demotivated as they received a lot of negative feedback, but very



Delegates attend a Community of Learning Principals session.

little in the way of positive affirmation, and Symphonia and UWC were looking at what could be done to empower Principals to create institutions of excellence.

With UWC Rector Brian O'Connell's mantras being 'take back your leadership role' and the EMS faculty training people to become better leaders and managers, the key turned when the idea of viewing the school as a business was mooted.

"Schools are not traditionally viewed as a business, but they deal with the same issues, from staff morale to managing money, throughput targets and rates of success, says Kamffer.

Symphonia was able to steam ahead with the Partner for Possibility programme with the first COLP Community of Practice session occurring by June 2011.

All Principals in the province, from both primary and high schools, are invited to the sessions which take place on the UWC campus, said Kamffer, with place being reserved for 90 -100 Principals on a first-booked-first-reserved basis and a few seats reserved for industry experts.

At each session there are three groups of roughly 30 Principals engaging in different discussions. However, it is not a matter of 30 Principals listening to an expert natter on about the topic at hand. Rather, the sessions are designed to be interactive.

Topics covered thus far include: the Principal as team leader, leadership in the 21st Century, and community engagement - lessons learnt (presented by Symphonia).

The agenda is not cast in stone. Principals are asked what issues they would like to see addressed and invited to share their experiences.

"The meetings are also unique in that it is not often you have people involved in primary, secondary and tertiary education all in one room together," says Kamffer, and often school Principals can provide ideas to each other based on what has worked at



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From left: James Eckley , Project Manager Symphonia for South Africa; Lindi Kamffer EMS faculty manager UWC; Alfreda Bekker, Principal of Holy Cross School, Bellville; Helene Brand, Manager and Partners MySchool MyVillage MyPlanet

their school in the past.

"It's an open, flexible environment and the agenda is fluid, it can change depending on the demand of attendees at the time."

As the inaugural session was held midway through 2011, two further sessions took place last year, plus the prestigious end-of-year-function. However, a full contingent of six sessions is planned this year, with the first having occurred on 7 March.

Besides the sessions which enable learning, sharing and networking, the other vitally important aspect to COLP is the unique Partner for Possibility leadership development programme which Symphonia began in February last year.

Here business leaders partner with school Principals to develop their leadership skills in a co-learning and co-action partnership.

The Partner for Possibility is an academic programme involving a commitment of 96 hours over a year and is accredited at NQF level 6.

Symphonia introduces the business leader and principal and raises corporate sponsorship to cover the R30 000 cost.

There are no formal classes but is run on a workshop format with the delivery of a Portfolio of Evidence at the end.

Symphonia for South Africa founder Louise van Rhyn says business leaders have for decades been developing the skills and knowledge required for organisational change and this programme enabled them to share their knowledge with school Principals in a one-on-one partnership.

The aim of the partnership, said Symphonia project manager James Eckley, is to achieve greater participation between the community and the school.

"A lot of Principals feel trapped in schools situated in communities which they feel are poorly resourced but the aim is to change that mindset and imagine what the situation would be if the community was actively involved in contributing to and participating in, the school, and then focussing on how to go about achieving that," said Eckley.

This meant that the partnered business leaders had the opportunity to put their skills to the test in a scenario beyond what they may be familiar with.

And schools are "queuing up for this programme", said van Rhyn, with Symphonia looking for more businesses to be involved.

She said 30 partnerships were currently in action and participating businesses realise that, "instead of throwing money at fragmented projects that lack coherence and impact, the Partnership project is far more meaningful for their executives".

"It gets them actively involved in an entirely reciprocal and action-based process, in which together the business leader and the Principal develop initiatives that not only mobilise teachers and learners, but that bring parents and the surrounding community together in projects to assist the school and thus enrich each learner's educational and social growth."

According to Tony Marshall, Principal at the Oude Molen Academy of Science and Technology which caters for learners in Grades 8 to 12, the partnership programme, as well as the community of practice sessions, have been hugely beneficial.

Marshall said he is teamed up with consultant Naren Sewpaul in the partnership programme and while Sewpaul cannot solve the challenges Marshall grapples with, he offers "insight and input" and is involved in "courageous conversation".

"There is a great deal of interaction and support on a professional level," said Marshall.

He was also enthusiastic about the other aspect of COLP, the community of practice sessions hosted at UWC.

"They treat Principals as if they are important.



Ridwan Samodien the Principal of Kannemeyer Primary School and Louise Van Rhyn the CEO and Founder of Symphonia for South Africa surrounded by learners from the school. Kannemeyer Primary School is part of the Partner for Possibility programme.

"It says to Principals 'hey, you are an important member of the learning community' - which includes universities, schools and the wider public. It's an absolute joy that these guys go to the trouble of giving you a decent cup of tea and a plate of snacks. When we're called to a meeting it's normally to be told do this and do that by our employer."

That Principals were asked what their needs were, was a welcome change from being dictated to.

Each school had its own unique set of challenges, he said, "no-one can tell a Principal what to do unless they've been a Principal themselves, and even so, each school has its own individual circumstances".

He said the fact that primary and secondary school Principals from across the spectrum of communities were able to interact and share ideas freely in a neutral environment was of major benefit.

"In a group of Principals we are able to lose our inhibitions, you are no longer protective of a perception of your school, you're among brothers in arms."

Although the COLP is only active in the Western Cape and involves schools that are within practical travelling distance of UWC's Bellville campus, there are plans to replicate both facets of the programme elsewhere. Possibly working with other tertiary institutions, the aim is to expand COLP to other provinces as soon as possible.