

# How Far Have We Come in Providing Support for Teachers?

## Investment in teachers is an investment in education outcomes

In 2014 I met with Liz, a school principal on the Cape Flats, to offer her staff a free workshop on inclusive education. Naturally the discussion progressed to challenges in education. She related her experience of trying to access support for Shirley, one of her teachers, who had been away from school periodically due to 'severe stress'. Shirley had returned to school each time because the education department refused to grant her an extended leave of absence. Liz had repeatedly approached Oscar, her circuit manager, to accommodate Shirley, whose erratic behaviour had become a challenge to learners, the school management and the rest of the staff. Her appeals fell on deaf ears. One day teachers urged Liz to go Shirley's class. As she approached the classroom, she heard

*terrified and angry screams and squeals emanating from Shirley's classroom. When Liz entered the classroom, a dishevelled and highly-strung Shirley was twisting the ears of a terrified eight-year old boy, to the horror of his classmates. Liz immediately called Oscar and demanded that he come to the school before a parent laid criminal charges against the education department. He arrived and signed the forms to be submitted to the department. The teacher and the school had a temporary respite. But, Liz pointed out, this was a Band-Aid on the psychosocial challenges that learners and teachers experience daily, at home and at school.*

This, and other accounts in the media, illustrates that teachers and learners need support to manage psychosocial and other challenges. What is available to them? We have a host of guidelines and policies, but as a department official recently acknowledged, policy and practice are often worlds apart.



Figure 3: A Learner Centred, Multisectoral Approach to Care and Support

## Care and support for teaching and learning framework

What immediately comes to mind is the *Care and Support for Teaching and Learning (CSTL) Framework*. The goal of CSTL is to realise the education rights of all children through schools becoming inclusive centres of learning, care and support.

Its objective is to establish a framework to co-ordinate the mainstreaming of care and support within the education system to address the multiple barriers to education that vulnerable children face. Central to this framework is a core of teachers who are empowered to support learners.

The framework acknowledges educator vulnerability and attrition.

*'In 2010, there were 12.26 million learners in 25,850 mainstream public and independent schools in South Africa, and over 418,000 educators. The delivery of quality education and the strengthening of schools as sites of care and support depend largely on the ability and buy-in of these 418,000 individuals. Well-trained and motivated educators are key to the achievement of Education for All goals by 2015. Teachers play a central role in the everyday life, education and wellbeing of learners. In fragile communities and households, the teacher often represents the only consistent, supportive adult relationship in the child's life. ... Investing in teachers is an investment in learner support, education and care. Retaining teachers in the teaching profession and encouraging new teachers to join the profession is a key challenge in Africa, and one which impacts greatly on school improvement interventions.'*

Educational leaders have the challenge of creating schools as workplace environments that support teacher retention, development and wellbeing. Many South African teachers face the daily reality of teaching large classes, as well as coping with the added pressures of curriculum reform and high performance expectations, with limited resources and support. The increasing effects of poverty and HIV and AIDS on school communities place additional responsibilities on teachers to support the psychosocial needs of learners, in order to improve learner attendance and performance in the classroom. This situation is compounded in rural areas, where schools and communities have limited access to professional support services.

In 2004, the Education Labour Relations Council (ELRC) commissioned a study to review educator attrition, following worrying anecdotal reports that educators were leaving the education profession in large numbers. The results highlight the need for urgent interventions to better support educators. Efforts to improve educator wellbeing are essential to the integrity of our education system and to improving learner access, retention and achievement outcomes." (*Action Step, National Model, Book 4, CSTL National Support Pack, DBE, 2011, pages 17 and 18*)

'The schooling system cannot pretend that its job is purely to teach because we are not teaching machines we are teaching children who have to be cared for and supported in order for them to succeed.' (Education department official, 2010) The same could be said of teachers.

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