

Importance of school districts' role in supporting instructional leadership

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School districts are a critical component of the country's national education system. They serve as delivery hubs of the Department of Basic Education (DBE) to provide quality teaching and learning to schools across the country. Given their strategic role and proximity to schools, the DBE has in recent years consolidated and streamlined their functions with a view to improving their capacity to service and support schools at community level.



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The DBE has also noted that, in the main, most schools' academic performances are closely linked to the level of support and involvement of the districts under which they fall.

Thus, schools that produce better results are those served by well-functioning and better run district offices. Similarly, poor academic outcomes are a reflection of inadequate support and service the schools receive from their districts.

Instructional leadership

As a district director myself, I can also attest to this reality. Districts that provide better services to schools are those that promote and support instructional leadership driven by school principals. The instructional leadership approach was developed in the 19th century in countries such as England and Australia, with the primary aim of improving learning outcomes through an inspection system. The focus was on how people in leadership positions can influence or improve learners' scholastic performance. South Africa was not excluded from this trend.

In the early years, leadership aimed at improving learner performance by focusing on school principals. But as the concept of school leadership evolved, the focus shifted to the way leaders at district offices support instructional leadership to improve learning outcomes. This has become even more necessary for South Africa due to poor learning outcomes that persist despite ongoing supervision of schools by districts.

District practices

This article seeks to highlight some of the basic district practices and the importance of the support afforded by the district office to the school principal through instructional leadership.

The findings also reveal that some districts do not perform as well as they should in their efforts to improve the effectiveness of their schools. According to these studies, the various intervention measures that are introduced often focus mainly on district directors and the duties they are expected to discharge to support school principals.

While it is vital to empower districts officials, more effort should also be made to improve learner performance by supporting instructional leadership at school levels. To date, most schools continue to receive poor service and support from their districts, and the kind of instructional leadership practices they are expected to employ to support school principals have not been fully understood by all at district level.

This is the challenge the national education system faces despite a plethora of guiding tools and policies available for supporting schools. Experts argue that the absence of specific practices that districts should adopt to provide a targeted, quality and sustained support to school principals, compromises the standard of learning outcomes envisaged by the very same education system.

Key players

It is important to understand clearly, in the context of this article, who the key players are to ensure effective implementation of instructional leadership that will improve learning outcomes. The main players involved in this chain are district director, chief education specialists, and circuit managers, who directly supervise school principals.

Following are some of the key elements of instructional leadership that can help improve learning outcomes.

- **Collaboration:** consistent collaborative work between district officials and school principals; and effective implementation of instructional leadership practices can provide good support for better learning outcomes.
- **Prioritisation:** teaching and learning must occupy the top agenda of every education institution. While there is acknowledgement that there are other duties those in leadership are expected to perform, teaching and learning cannot be relegated to the lower level. In fact, it should be an area where most leaders' scheduled time is allocated.
- **Personal development:** this is one of the strategic elements that assist instructional leaders with proper selection of relevant materials and to monitor the effective implementation of teaching and learning strategies.
- **Alignment of curriculum, instruction, assessment and standards:** these are fundamental practices to support instructional leadership. It is important to understand that if these instructional leadership elements operate in isolation of one another; learner performance will not be realised.
- **Data analysis:** Any meaningful decision-making process can be easily understood and managed if it is informed and

backed by reliable data. Therefore, effective data analysis in this instance plays a pivotal role in guiding instructional leaders to use multiple sources of information to assess performance and to improve learning. Monitoring is a crucial element of all leaders' responsibilities. After the analysis of data and decision-making processes, it is critical for instructional leaders to begin the process of monitoring the implementation of decisions arrived at, informed by proper reading of data.

- **Effective use of resources, and decentralised accountability mechanisms:** These are important elements that are instrumental in improving learning. It is necessary to indicate that for districts to support schools in improving learning, there is a need for a total shift from what districts currently focus on, especially in curriculum and instruction and use of resources to anchor teaching and learning.

Research conducted by two education experts, Loyiso Jita from Department of Mathematics, Natural Sciences and Technology Education, University of the Free State (UFS) and Matseliso Mokhele from Department of Curriculum and Instructional Studies, University of South Africa in 2014, highlighted the importance and value of support which they viewed as the reason for the accrual of content knowledge and improved skills by school leaders. District leadership, therefore, is examined, not only in relation to their support to schools, but also in relation to their ability to formulate relevant policies.

Steps to success

How did we, at the Fezile Dabi district, succeed to implement our instructional leadership initiative? In the first instance, districts' support for instructional leadership by school principals is crucial for enabling principals to deal with organisational issues. This is so that an environment conducive to learning and achieving improved learner performance can be fostered. In this regard, our district consciously organised capacity building programmes, particularly for district officials.

Through the collaboration between KST and the FSDoE, the Fezile Dabi district was assisted by "PILO" – Programme for the Improvement Learner Outcomes, an organisation whose primary function is to support instructional leadership across the sector, especially for district officials with the view to improve learning.

This was also boosted by the first ever 'Professional Learning Groups' initiative which benefitted both district-based officials and school principals. It is through these platforms that we are able to initiate and further align our programmes to improve learning.

These are but some of the activities the district employed in establishing a safe and orderly environment, and climate of expectations conducive to the improvement of learning.

The provision of direction and support was found to be important in improving learning and the DBE has acknowledged and given this a stamp of approval. It is on this basis that the district initiated and guided school principals through continuous and well-planned engagement sessions between the district officials and school principals.

The research by Jita and Mokhele in 2014 illustrates this point further; they viewed this as the reason for the accumulation of content knowledge and improved skills by school leaders.

District leadership was therefore examined, not only in relation to their support to schools, but with regard to their ability to formulate policies and set up structures that would form a support base for instructional leadership by school principals.

Finally, the focused programmes and capacity building activities for district officials and school principals ignited love and passion among the officials. Today they continue to provide support to school principals in the implementation of curriculum activities.

The collaboration between the FSDoE and KST has been, and continues to be a strong catalyst for Fezile Dabi district becoming the beacon of hope for effective teaching and learning that it is today.

The communication of goals, as a core instructional leadership practice, needs to be improved in practice. Many school principals confirmed this need, especially during one-on-one development sessions. They unanimously agreed that the failure by district-level staff members to communicate school goals effectively to school principals perpetuates misunderstandings. And that lack of support and partnership between schools and districts tends to affect learner performance negatively.

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