

Business executives get involved to solve educational crisis

Businesses across South Africa are taking up a challenge to use their organisational leadership skills to help combat the crisis in education. This is being achieved through an innovative concept that brings them together in collaborative partnerships with school principals.

The challenge is being led by social entrepreneur and founder of the non-profit organisation Symphonia for South Africa, Dr Louise van Rhyn. "Let's start thinking like co-owners of this country and get actively involved in our future. We can't wait for government to do this. Our organisation is inspired both by the 'Walk Together' vision born out of 2009 Dinokeng Scenarios, as well as the call of Minister Trevor Manuel's National Planning Commission which has made the education crisis one of the top two crises facing our country."

Of the 21 000 schools in South Africa, only 2 000 are delivering acceptable educational outcomes. Over 90% of South African schools can therefore be classified as underperforming. "However, the real problem goes beyond the school environment, which only accounts for 20% of a child's waking hours. The key differences between schools that succeed or fail are the vision, commitment and leadership skills of the principal, along with the extent to which parents and other community members are involved. Raising children and preparing them for active citizenship is a societal, communal responsibility," says Van Rhyn.

Partnership engages students, teachers and parents

To this end, the NPO has developed the School at the Centre of Community (S@CC) project - a large-scale change process to radically transform education. It incorporates the innovative Partner for Possibility leadership development programme in which business leaders and school principals develop their leadership skills in a co-learning and co-action partnership. This partnership in turn also engages students, teachers, parents and the broader community, resulting in schools experiencing real change and a sense of possibility.

Van Rhyn explains: "Business leaders have for decades been developing the skills and knowledge required to lead organisational change. This programme enables them to share what they have learnt with school principals in a one-on-one partnership. At the same time, the partnership provides the business leaders with an opportunity to further develop their own leadership skills by seeing how effective they can be used in a world beyond what they know.

Project is valuable for business executives

"We now have schools queuing up for this programme, and we are looking for more businesses to be involved. Those that have already participated soon 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."

The programme, which is recognised by the University of the Western Cape's School of Business and Finance, is currently funded through corporate sponsorships each of which sponsors a business leader and a principal for R30 000 for one year. This also requires a commitment of 96 hours from both partners, spent in formal training courses and working together to facilitate and lead change at the school. With 30 partnerships already in action, the aim is to have the project in 150 schools by the end of 2012, expanding it to all nine provinces as soon as possible.

To learn more about Partners for Possibility, go to www.symphonia.net.

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