

# Poor education - another new initiative

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5 Aug 2013

There is little doubt that SA's education system is systemically flawed and in urgent need of fixing.



The problems in education have been amplified by the recent World Economic Forum (WEF) Global Information Technology Report 2013. The report ranks the country's maths and science education second-last in the world, only ahead of Yemen. It further ranks the quality of our education system 140th of 144 countries and our Internet access in schools 111th of 143 countries.

The government has acknowledged that a comprehensive effort is needed to address the problems.

And the blueprint for socioeconomic development, the National Development Plan (NDP), has prioritised education. Last month, the government, business and stakeholders launched a collaborative initiative the National Education Collaboration Trust (NECT).

NECT calls for concerted action for national education reform, saying SA's education system "needs urgent action". To do this, it aims to lift the level of dialogue by including more stakeholders in regular reviews of progress, and to keep a check on actions in SA that undermine schooling.

The partnership aims to breathe life into the NDP's skills proposals by taking large business' commitment a few steps further - helping to build management capacity at district and school levels.

## Stamp of approval

Leaders in business, and government decision-makers have given their stamp of approval to the new public-private partnership to reform SA's ailing education system.

Training and support programmes will be offered to assist schools and districts, while the plan is to provide "mentors" and support capacity in under-staffed areas. Its formation follows a leadership dialogue in education at the end of last year and, in a significant step for SA's fractious relationship between unions, business and government, brings together unions,

parent bodies, non-governmental organisations and community leaders, to support the government in improving education quality.

The dialogue process last year set up an education collaboration framework which proposed the creation of NECT and a national education council.

The council will be the main body, checking progress and giving advice about changes. The first on-the-ground action is due to unfold from next year.

One of the founding trustees of NECT, FirstRand's chief executive Sizwe Nxasana, said over the weekend that involvement makes sound financial sense for business, as growth is impossible unless more qualified graduates are educated.

SA's auditor-general Terence Nombembe, who supports the project, said the challenge is about developing the financial management and governance skills to ensure budgets are spent effectively.

## **Skills**

"The notion of acquiring skills through the revolving door simply isn't sustainable. When a chief financial officer moves from one post to another, one department's gain is another department's loss," he said.

The education council includes the general secretary of the South African Democratic Teachers' Union Mugwena Maluleke, youth organisations and representatives from private-sector schooling. A number of government departments are represented, including some provincial education departments, although not all provinces are on board yet.

The project's patrons include deputy chairman of the National Planning Commission Cyril Ramaphosa, as well as former president of the National Union of Mineworkers James Motlatsi and former deputy president of SA Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka.

Embattled Basic Education Minister Angie Motshekga is one of the founding trustees.

Strategic architect at TerraNova, Brett Bowes, who is involved in facilitating both projects, says the NDP has been widely welcomed by big business and fixing the education system is considered a priority in that plan.

"This project could turn out to be the most important public-private initiative in our country's history. It gives legs to all the talk. It goes to the heart of the concepts of economic liberation and of democratic sustainability," Bowes said.

The NDP has identified key focus areas for improving education over the next 18 years, including school management, district support, infrastructure and results-oriented mutual accountability between schools and communities. Some private sector bodies are making significant progress already and this is likely to guide the NECT on how best practice can be applied.

Nxasana, for example, is the chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Thuthuka Bursary Fund, a partnership with government and private sector donors. It has already provided 95 qualified graduates, with 1,200 more in the academic pipeline, but an interesting "challenge" has been laid down.