Systemic School Improvement Interventions in South Africa

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CHAPTER 8

LESSONS ON DISTRICT-LEVEL SUPPORT AND INTEGRATION

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1. BACKGROUND

The education reform initiatives stemming from the national government stand a limited chance of succeeding without effective system capacity within the provinces to implement the reforms. One level of the system that is central to the delivery of the reforms is the district – the local level of the education system.

In their review of seven national education systems, Caldwell and Harris (2006) demonstrate the importance of careful design of the local levels of the system. They conclude that there is a “new enterprise logic of public education, one that places the student at the centre of the education system and ensures high-level performance of all students in all settings”. Caldwell and Harris (2006) advise that education structures, particularly at local level, must be configured in accordance with this new logic. Key to this advice is that resources at this level are aligned with the unique mix of learning needs that exist, but also with constant changes at school level. Perhaps the most important message from their review is that “the nation or system that believes it has got the balance right for all time… is doomed to disappointments”. This observation suggests that countries should continually assess the appropriateness of the local level of the education system and adapt it to changing circumstances.

In South Africa, the ruling party, the African National Congress, highlighted a concern about lack of clarity on the role of the local level of the education system, the district, at its 52nd policy conference in December 2007. This was the first time that the role of the district was raised officially since the National Conference on Districts that was held in 1997 (Prew, 2011). Even at the ANC conference, the call was about defining the role of the district and not about taking action to bolster the effectiveness of this level.

The ANC policy conference recommended that “Norms and standards be developed to determine the roles, functions and responsibilities of district offices”. In line with this recommendation, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) developed Guidelines for the Organisation, Roles and Responsibilities of the Education Districts (2011). The guidelines document acknowledges that districts are key to the day-to-day delivery of the education services (both administrative and professional) outlined in the national and provincial policies and programmes. It further recognises that despite the importance of this level, there is no common understanding of the role of the districts, their scope in terms of authority, resourcing, geographic coverage and the number of schools and circuits that should fall under their jurisdiction.

The National Development Plan also recognises the role of the districts, noting that “teaching in schools can be improved through targeted support by district offices. District offices should also ensure communication and information sharing between the education authorities and schools and also between schools” (NDP, 2011: 303).
This is perhaps an understatement of the central role that the district level plays in maintaining public education operations and the role it should play in improving learning outcomes.

It is clear from its proposals over the past 15 years that the government recognises the importance of education districts but it has had only a narrow focus on their role, which has not been sufficient to ensure that the districts become a key player in improving the education system.

In the implementation of the Systemic School Improvement Model, the district level was expected to host the project and collaborate with the project staff to plan, roll out and monitor the rollout of the model. The district coordination component of the model was expected to ensure proper coordination of district and project activities, strengthen cohesion between the project components, and mobilise additional project resources from funders.

JET’s experience in the respective rural districts in the North West and Eastern Cape, where the BSSIP and COEP have been implemented, suggests that the districts are facing an uphill battle and that there is, perhaps, a weak engagement with district discourse, nationally. This chapter sheds some light on the profiles, experiences and workings of the districts in relation to the assumptions and success conditions of the Systemic School Improvement Model. It further presents the approaches and practices that worked in these endeavours to implement the projects with the districts.

2. THE ROLE OF DISTRICTS IN THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

The district level is a complex tier of the education system in South Africa. Districts are mini-departments of education on their own. Although the product mix, quality standards and resourcing aspects are determined at levels above the districts, this tier of the system is expected to process the policies and programmes adopted at national and provincial levels into district-specific programmes and rollout plans, and to implement all aspects of education operations, such as curriculum, finances and resourcing. Figure 1, which outlines the planning, programming and implementation value chain, highlights the district as the key level responsible for the programming and rollout of national and provincial policies and programmes (DBE, 2011). The programming and rollout activities carried out by the district, at the interface between the provincial department and the schools, are bidirectional in nature. In respect of the provision of teaching posts at schools, for instance, the district office collects schools’ information and requirements, considers the pool of teaching posts which is decided at provincial level, and gives guidance to the schools on how to plan and place teachers.

In this context where the districts receive the ‘product mix’ (policies and programmes) and resources, what they need for success is the appropriate organisational capacity to process the programmes for local implementation and to implement them accordingly. Ker (2003) defines “organisational capacity” as the ability or potential to perform by “successfully applying skills and resources to accomplish organisational goals and satisfy stakeholders’ expectations”. Capacity is a function of staffing, infrastructure, technology, financial resources, strategic leadership, process management, networks, and links with other organisations and groups.

A complementary requirement to capacity is programming. Programming can be defined as a process of setting up interventions that incorporate a theory of change, clear sets of objectives and targets, a sequenced outline of activities, and a mix of resources required to attain objectively verifiable achievements.

The following section of this chapter reviews the profiles of the two districts in which JET worked on the BSSIP and COEP to establish whether they had sufficient capacity, firstly, to maintain educational operations, and secondly, to collaborate with the projects to improve the quality of learning and teaching in the schools.
3. DISTRICT PROFILES: RESOURCING AND CAPACITY

The effectiveness of the district in its school support and monitoring functions depends partly on the availability of resources and its use of these. Among the district resources used to support and monitor schools are the number of personnel in subject areas, cars, communication facilities and financial resources. These factors, with the exception of financial resources, are profiled below. Financial information was not available to the project teams.

3.1 Human resources

Adequate and stable staffing in key management positions and subject advisory services are essential to the effectiveness of districts. Table 1 below profiles the percentage of positions filled and vacant in the district management hierarchy: district director, head of advisory services, and circuit managers, and Table 2 presents the numbers of subject advisors for the four key subjects that were supported by the projects.

3.1.1 District management vacancy profile

| Table 1: Vacancy rates in districts (2010–12) |
|-----------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Director level   |             |             |             |             |             |             |             |             |             |             |             |             |            |
| Bojanala         | A           | A           | A           | A           | 1           | 1           | 1           | 1           | 1           | 1           | 1           | 1           | 8           | 66.6        |
| Cofimvaba        | 1           | 1           | 1           | 1           | 1           | 1           | 1           | 1           | S/A         | A           | A           | 9.5         | 79.2        |
| Head Advisory Services |
| Bojanala         | 1           | 1           | 1           | 1           | 1           | 1           | 1           | 1           | 1           | A           | A           | 10          | 83.3        |
| Cofimvaba        | 1           | 1           | 1           | 1           | 1           | 1           | 1           | 1           | S/A         | A           | A           | 9.5         | 79.2        |
| Circuit Managers |
| Bojanala         | 1           | 1           | 1           | 1           | 1           | 1           | 1           | 1           | 1           | 1           | 1           | 12          | 100         |
| Cofimvaba        | 0.5         | 0.5         | 0.5         | 0.5         | 0.5         | 0.5         | 0.5         | 0.5         | 0.5         | 0.5         | 0.5         | 0.5         | 6           | 50          |

1 – Substantive Appointee; A – Acting; S/A – Acting and Substantive appointee; 0.5 – Substantive for 50% of the time
Both districts experienced some instability at the levels of district director and head of subject advisory services during the 12 quarters for which information was collected. Within this period, there was an acting director for about a third of the time in Bojanala and one-fifth of the time in Cofimvaba. In both cases, the substantive district directors were moved to higher acting positions as a result of changes in the provincial heads of departments. In both cases, the heads of advisory services were moved to district director positions. The circuit manager in Bojanala has been in the position for the full period, while the circuit manager in Cofimvaba has been in the position for half the time, since he is also acting as the head of management and governance. He has been acting in this position for almost five years – 19 quarters.

It appears from these two cases that people in district management do not move out of the system. However, instability at the district head office level tends to filter down the hierarchy. The appointment of acting managers in these positions robs the district management of the opportunity to design and drive the district strategy confidently because managers do not know whether they will be moved from the positions they currently occupy. JET has observed that the managers in acting positions avoid taking long-term decisions regarding systemic or school improvement. Changes in leadership also tend to weaken accountability systems as the acting leadership does not stay long enough to take responsibility for educational outcomes.

3.1.2 Subject advisory services vacancy profile

In Table 2 the information on Cofimvaba relates to the entire district which is covered by the subject advisors and that on Bojanala relates to the area office, a level below the district office, where the subject advisors are stationed.

The two cases corroborate the observation made that there is no common understanding on what the shape and size of a district should be.

- One of the differences in the two cases is that subject advisors are stationed at different levels of the education system. Subject advisory services in the North West Province are located one step closer to the schools than is the case in the Eastern Cape.

| Table 2: Number of subject advisors for key subjects |
|---------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
|                                 | FET Phase       | GET Phase       | Foundation      |
|                                 | (Intermediate and Senior Phase) | Phase |                  |
|                                 | English | Maths | Maths Lit | Physical Science | Maths | English | Technology | Science | Lit | Num |
| Cofimvaba district              | Schools = 32    | Schools = 248   |                  |
| Number of SAs                   | 2    | 1    | 0        | 1                | 1    | 1        | 1          | 1       | 1   | 1   |
| Ratio of SAs to schools         | 1:16  | 32   | 0        | 32               | 1:248| 248      | 248        | 248     | 1:248| 248 |
| Ratio of SAs to teachers        | 1:32  | 32   | 32       | 32               | 1:248| 248      | 248        | 248     | 1:248| 248 |
| Moses Kotane West               | Schools = 17    | Schools = 68*   |                  |
| Number of SAs                   | 1    | 1    | 1        | 0                | 1    | 1        | 1          | 1       | 1   | 1   |
| Ratio of SAs to schools         | 1:17  | 17   | 17       | 17               | 1:68 | 68       | 68         | 68      | 1:47 | 47  |
| Ratio of SAs to teachers        | 1:17  | 17   | 17       | 17               | 1:68 | 68       | 68         | 68      | 1:47 | 47  |

*68 GET schools (this includes some of the grades located in some high schools)
• Another difference is in the ratio of subject advisors to schools and teachers. The ratio of subject advisors to schools for the GET subjects in Cofimvaba is 1:248, which means that there are 3.7 times fewer subject advisors per school in Cofimvaba than in the Moses Kotane West area of the Bojanala district.

• The difference in the ratios of subject advisors to the schools narrows at the FET level, where the ratio in Cofimvaba is the same or half that in the Moses Kotane West Area. Furthermore, it should be noted that in the Cofimvaba District, subject advisors are responsible for schools spread over a much larger area – within a radius of 150 km of the district office – than those in Moses Kotane West who are responsible for schools within a 30 km radius of the area office.

• The ratio of subject advisors to primary schools is four times lower than the FET ratio in Moses Kotane West and seven times lower in Cofimvaba. This pattern indicates that the districts invest more in the FET phase, where the stakes are high. Another reason that the FET Phase looks better resourced is that the number of schools and teachers is lower than in the GET and Foundation Phases.

• The number of subject advisors in the Bojanala District as a whole is 146 compared to 32 in Cofimvaba District.

To gauge how much time the subject advisors have for each school in their district or area, JET carried out a simple calculation which assumes that subject advisors spend half their time visiting schools, i.e. 115 of the 230 working days in a year.

As shown in Table 3, this indicates that in Cofimvaba subject advisors would have 3.7 hours available for each subject at each primary school per year and 28.8 hours for each subject at each high school. In Moses Kotane West subject advisors would have 13.5 hours for their subjects at each primary school and 54.1 hours at each high school.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3: Estimated hours that subject advisors have to support schools</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Average ratio</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Cofimvaba District</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moses Kotane West Area Office</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Hours/Schools = (115 days x number of SAs x 8 hours)/number of schools/number of subjects*

This allocation of time to schools is inadequate to bring about any measureable change, certainly for the primary schools. The time allocation is even lower if the time required to travel to the schools is taken into account.

The assumption that for the projects subject advisors would accompany the consultants and technical assistants to the schools was proven wrong as the districts have meagre, if any, absorptive capacity, as reflected in the table above. In most instances, in both districts, the subject advisors were not able to accompany the technical assistants and mentors to schools as expected. Furthermore, it became clear that most of the time the subject advisors were not even able to visit schools on their own to provide support to the teachers. In both districts the subject advisors’ support to schools and teachers took the form mainly of cluster meetings and training workshops held at central venues.

In Moses Kotane West, each subject advisor is required to visit one school each month. While better than not visiting the schools at all, this provision is still not adequate to bring about improvements in all the schools. Subject advisors who have
a high number of schools to support are faced with the difficulty of not knowing how to allocate their time effectively. In addition, the high ratio of schools to subject advisors rules out the possibility of any classroom support and monitoring by the subject advisors. Most, if not all, the schools require this level of support.

3.2 Communication facilities and related services

Table 4 presents information about the functioning amenities and communications resources at the respective area offices. The area offices, called “education development centres” in Cofimvaba, serve three circuits each with just under 100 schools in each area. Information was collected over the last six months of 2012.

None of the key resources or services worked in the Tsomo area office over this six-month period because the electricity supply had been disconnected. This was because the leasing contract between the Eastern Cape government and the owner of the property it leases was not extended.

In Moses Kotane West the communications resources and services worked for most of the period monitored, although there were intermittent disruptions during the six months. The telephones did not work through August and part of September and the internet and email facilities were not working for six days in November and one day in December. These disruptions were reportedly due to late payments or technical problems. For the last four months of the year, the area office did not have working printing facilities because the printer cartridges had run out. It is worth noting that the photocopying facilities were working because they are maintained by the service provider under a lease agreement.

3.3 Office vehicles

Table 5 paints a picture of the provision of cars in the two district offices. The Bojanala District has 118 cars and Cofimvaba has only 21. While the Bojanala District has more cars because it has twice the number of schools as Cofimvaba, it also has a much more favourable ratio of cars to schools than Cofimvaba.

It is also worth noting that 11 out of the 14 subsidised cars in Cofimvaba belong to circuit managers. This means that there are in effect 10 cars available to the 32 subject advisors and the other corporate services officials to visit schools and the provincial department as well as to conduct other business of the district.
4. DYNAMICS OF LEARNER ENROLMENTS IN RURAL DISTRICTS

District offices on their own do not tell the full story of the districts. An equally important aspect at this level of the system is the profile of the schools for which the districts are responsible. Both the target circuits of the systemic school improvement projects (Retladirela, in Bojanala, North West and Mthawelanga, in Cofimvaba, Eastern Cape) are rural circuits characterised by a large number of small schools. In Mthawelanga circuit, 71% of the schools have enrolments of fewer than 200 learners, and in Retladirela circuit, 72% of the schools. Changes in learner numbers are often a result of parents moving to areas closer to job opportunities and better living conditions around towns.

Between 2008 and 2012, learner enrolment in the Mthawelanga circuit schools declined by 3% and in the Retladirela circuit it increased by 20%. This is so in spite of the fact that in the Retladirela circuit one school was closed down as it was considered not to be viable. The year-on-year changes in total enrolments in the two districts ranged from -8.8% to +16%. It is not clear whether these changes are normal, but the overall enrolments over the past four years do not appear to have moved too sharply. Changes in the levels of enrolments had been raised as a big concern by the district officials.

One of the main problems faced by schools with low enrolments is that they receive a small allocation of teachers. The challenge for the education system as a whole is that the running of district operations becomes an inefficient exercise. The large numbers of very small schools is something outside the ambit of the Systemic School Improvement Model, but it is clearly a constraint on any improvement initiative, for two reasons. Firstly, the small schools struggle to absorb additional training and support activities as the limited number of staff can barely maintain the prevailing systems and practices. Secondly, there are too many schools and not enough district staff to visit them often enough to ensure sustained change. In the Eastern Cape for instance, the education system will continue fighting a losing battle unless the basic economics of small, sub-economic schools are addressed.

5. KEY LESSONS FROM WORKING WITH THE DISTRICTS

The Systemic School Improvement Model developed for the projects considered here, assumed that the districts are adequately staffed and resourced for them to collaborate effectively with JET in planning and co-implementing the projects – particularly the school support and monitoring activities. This was not the case, so it was not easy for the districts to collaborate with JET to improve the quality of learning and teaching.

5.1 Tangible and sustainable results require more than just the keenness of the district to partner in a project

JET has observed that the district offices are keen to be involved with development agencies that wish to partner with them to implement improvement programmes. However, keenness and enthusiasm on their own are not sufficient for successful improvement programmes. Appropriate structures, resourcing levels, collaboration with unions and strong and consistent leadership are some of the key conditions required for the successful implementation of school improvement interventions.

5.2 District partnerships should be concerned with more than just project activities

The location of the project coordinator at the district office made it easier to unlock blockages in the implementation of the project activities and to ensure that the project remained relevant and important to the district staff. As a result, the project activities remained integrated, although a rift always occurred between the implementation of the project and district office activities as neither of the districts had adequate resources to roll out school support and monitoring activities as intensively as the project staff did.
5.3 Districts suffer from a ‘weak dosage syndrome’

One of the greatest challenges facing districts appears to be their inability to implement school support and monitoring services effectively. Because they don’t have enough inputs, what districts tend to do is to take a ‘dosage’ meant for a handful of ‘patients’ and share it among all their needy ‘patients’. What they get in return is a complete lack of improvement or even resistance. The dosages of school support and monitoring visits and workshops organised by the districts are too weak to produce quick and measurable change.

5.4 Structural and resourcing constraints in the districts limit their capacity to absorb or lead change

As critical as they are in mediating national and provincial policies to schools, districts seem to be incorrectly configured and ill-equipped to drive and maintain change in schools. The related challenge to school improvement programmes, which happen to be implemented from outside government, is that they are implemented in a system with insufficient absorptive capacity. The districts do not have sufficient capacity – in terms of number of staff at district and school levels, resources and meaningful programmes – to be able to do the work of supporting and monitoring schools. This means that the district officials are not able to absorb new skills and practices propagated by the intervention programmes.

6. CONCLUSION

Following the observations made in this chapter regarding the role and the capacity of districts, it is important to emphasise that no tangible reform of or improvement in the education system will take root in the next few decades before the South African government has made some hard decisions about beefing up the districts. The current debates are still stuck in “the role of districts”, which we have observed over the past two decades. What is required is proper staffing, resourcing and programming of school monitoring and support activities. Properly staffing the districts will significantly increase public spending on education. Nonetheless, such a move to strengthen districts should be seen as an opportunity to:

- Strengthen the command from central government, which is direly needed, particularly in the weaker provinces;
- Right-size the provincial level of the education system by decentralising excess capacity lying in provincial departments to the district level where more practical work is done; and
- Increase the value for money in school-level investments through increased and strengthened monitoring and support from the districts.

The key lesson for non-governmental investors in school improvement is that social investment ventures that deserve to be supported should present more than a keen district director or management. Appropriate and well-staffed structures, effective resourcing levels in equipment and services, collaboration with unions, strong and consistent leadership and strong political will from the side of government should be non-negotiable preconditions for engagement.

At best, school improvement should run from within the government system and should be aimed at strengthening programming and implementation within the districts. Additional improvement interventions that are not integrated into the district programmes carry no residual value. The new approach to education improvement by non-governmental agencies and social investors should be one that seeks to support the reform agenda of government and, working with the beneficiaries, to fix the fundamentals in the system.

With the deficiencies presented above, a hope for effective systemic change is futile. In this situation, districts will only be able to satisfy bureaucratic planning and reporting requirements and maintain order, rather than drive the “new enterprise logic of public education, one that places the student at the centre of the education...
system and ensures high-level performance of all students in all settings”. Driving
the new enterprise logic will entail ensuring that district structures and staffing
levels, material resources, leadership and culture are relevant to the learner-centred
enterprise logic.

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This chapter looks at the roles played by the various stakeholders in supporting the objectives of the projects, as well as the stakeholder structures and their effectiveness in guiding and supporting the projects.