



Public school partnerships:

A guide to supporting & improving schools





Table of contents

4 Acronyms and abbreviations

5 Foreword

6 What is a public school partnership?

10 How do partnership schools work?

10 _____ The partnership framework

14 _____ Setting objectives, roles, & responsibilities

15 _____ The legal framework: Memorandum of understanding & service-level agreement

16 _____ Iterative consultation and co-creation

16 _____ A case study in co-creation: The Lesedi Solar Park Trust

19 Becoming a school’s nonprofit partner

20 _____ Theory of change

21 _____ Organisational structure

21 _____ Funder accountability role

22 _____ Partnering with government

23 Starting a partnership school

26 _____ Building strong partnership foundations

28 _____ Building trust

30 _____ Baseline assessments

31 _____ Choosing a school improvement approach

33 _____ Conceptualising an education programme

36 _____ Enhancing capacity, flexibility, & accountability

37 _____ Capacity

37 _____ School leadership development

38 _____ Strengthening management & leadership skills

40 _____ Instructional leadership

42 _____ Teacher professional development

44 _____ School governing body (SGB) development

46 _____ Enabling environment

46 _____ Additional capacity

48 _____ Academic support programmes

49 _____ Non-academic learner support

50 _____ Physical environment

51 _____ Accountability

52 _____ Enhanced principal accountability

52 _____ School improvement planning & monitoring

54 _____ Curriculum management

54 _____ Curriculum delivery

55 _____ Curriculum monitoring

56 _____ Learner outcomes

56 _____ The education council

58 _____ Flexibility

58 _____ Teaching & learning time

59 _____ Curriculum flexibility

59 _____ External assessments

60 _____ Lessons from Axiom’s phased approach to school improvement

65 _____ Partnering with government effectively

65 _____ Unblocking key issues

67 Conclusion: Building together for the future

68 Reference list



Acronyms and abbreviations

Foreword

CAPS	Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CSA	Common Schools Assessment
EGMA	Early Grade Maths Assessment
EGRA	Early Grade Reading Assessment
MOU	memorandum of understanding
NPO	nonprofit organisation
SA-SAMS	South African School Administration and Management System
SGB	school governing body
SIP	School Improvement Plan
SLA	service-level agreement
SMT	school management team

Since 1994, South Africa has aimed to increase access to quality education and opportunities for all learners. Parents, communities, leaders, government, and businesses have partnered together to build the future we want our children to have.

We have seen many different partnerships and collaborations in South African education over the past 30 years. Today, in 2025, those of us who partner with schools and government know that our partnerships must be deep, long-lasting, and meaningful to school communities in order to succeed.

The Public School Partnerships programme aims to create such partnerships and has been doing so since 2016. The programme has supported and funded four nonprofit organisations in three provinces. The public school partnership model is also expanding as other, independently-funded organisations and communities pursue this work.

Nonprofit organisations (NPOs) work with school leadership to improve schools through consistent, reliable support that responds to the schools’ needs. Through these partnerships, the organisations aim to reduce learner dropout, increase learner achievement, and ensure that all children, regardless of socio-economic status, are able to fully participate in learning and life.

This document mainly focuses on the work of Axiom Education, which has worked closely with 13 schools in the rural Eastern Cape for the past nine years. It also discusses the experiences of the other three NPOs to a lesser extent.

We share Axiom’s work here in the spirit of partnership and community. We hope that communities, parents, schools, businesses, funders, nonprofits, and government will find it useful in our common goal to build a better future for our children.



Anthony Hall
Public School Partnerships
Project Lead

What is a public school partnership?

Public school partnerships help poorer South African children, who attend no-fee public schools, get the same quality education as wealthier learners at fee-paying public schools.

Every public school worldwide has to deal with capacity limitations. While fee-paying public schools can rely on wealthy parents for extra support and resources, no-fee schools cannot. Civil society has often stepped in to help no-fee schools address these constraints in ways that align with and complement the public education sector. Public school partnerships are one of the most powerful ways to bridge the capacity gap.

The partnership is between a no-fee public school, a provincial education department, and a nonprofit organisation (NPO) which specialises in whole school support. Teaching staff, parents, learners, and the local community represent the school, and education nonprofit partners help them improve their learner results.

The partnership aims to improve learner outcomes by helping no-fee schools enhance and maintain excellent management and governance of their institutions.

The nonprofit partner provides schools with support, skills, and staff to help the school build and maintain high-quality leadership.¹ The way nonprofits work with schools depends on the type of partnership model employed. School communities, government, and nonprofit partners co-create the model.

Currently, the Public School Partnerships programme supports two types of public school partnerships in South Africa: Collaboration Schools and Partnership Schools.²

¹“School leadership” in this publication refers to the school management team (SMT) and the school governing body (SGB).

²Visit: www.publicschoolpartnerships.co.za

Collaboration Schools

- The Collaboration Schools model is specific to the Western Cape, and the term comes from the legislation that gives nonprofit partners a vote on the school governing body (SGB).

Partnership Schools

- Outside of the Western Cape, we use the term Partnership Schools to refer to schools that use the public school partnership model.

In the Partnership Schools model, nonprofit partners are co-opted SGB members. This means that they are not elected members with voting rights, but that the SGB appoints them because of their knowledge or expertise in a specific area. Based on the agreement between schools, the government, and nonprofit partners, the nonprofit partner is mandated to attend SGB meetings and run SGB training sessions. This allows nonprofit partners to help the SGB and school management team (SMT) with tasks such as creating school policies or being financially effective and compliant.

Partnership Schools, like all other ordinary public schools, operate under the South African Schools Act.



How various types of schools in South Africa are managed, governed and financed

Independent schools

Independent schools are not governed according to the South African Schools Act and therefore don't have SGBs. Their governance structure is entirely privately determined.

While government has a measure of high-level oversight, each school is privately responsible for management, hiring, and any support services.

Independent schools range from the traditional high-fee models, to an increasing number of low-fee providers. The distinction is that high-fee schools typically do not receive any public funding, although they can apply and a handful do receive up to 20% of the government subsidy available to state schools.

Low-fee schools are eligible for up to 60% of the government subsidy, with each application dealt with on a case-by-case basis. Government-subsidised, low-fee independent schools aim to provide publicly-funded education to marginalised communities with the agility and autonomy of independent schools.



Ordinary public schools

Public schools fall under the South African Schools Act, and are governed by SGBs, which are composed according to the Act and must include a majority of parents. The Act outlines the composition and roles of SGBs, with every SGB required to have a majority of parents.

The provincial education department is responsible for staff recruitment and employment, school management and funding, and a range of support services.

Schools are categorised from quintile 1 to quintile 5. The amount of public funding a school gets varies according to its quintile. Quintile 1 (the poorest) schools receive the highest allocation at just over R1700 per learner per year, while quintile 5 (the wealthiest) schools receive allocations as low as R300 per learner per year. Fee-paying schools, which are usually quintiles 4 and 5, supplement this funding through school fees. This additional funding enables fee-paying schools to do things like hire more teachers and reduce class sizes. Only these teachers are employed by the SGB.

Partnership Schools

Partnership Schools are ordinary public schools and are usually no-fee schools that serve poor communities.

A Partnership School has a nonprofit partner that is co-opted as a non-voting SGB member as per the South African Schools Act.

The nonprofit partner works closely with the provincial education department to provide the school with a range of support that includes education programmes, HR and finance skills, and teacher coaching.

The school community, government and the partner form an education council, a peer accountability and learning forum.

Collaboration Schools

Collaboration Schools only exist in the Western Cape and are public schools that serve marginalised communities.

Like all other ordinary public schools, they're governed by an SGB. Because quintile 1 to 3 schools are no-fee schools and serve poor communities, the parent body (and therefore the SGB) doesn't have the same resources as wealthier schools. To bridge this gap, Collaboration Schools are paired

with education nonprofits that have a 50% vote on the SGB and support the school with HR and finance skills, teaching and learning resources, and leadership coaching.

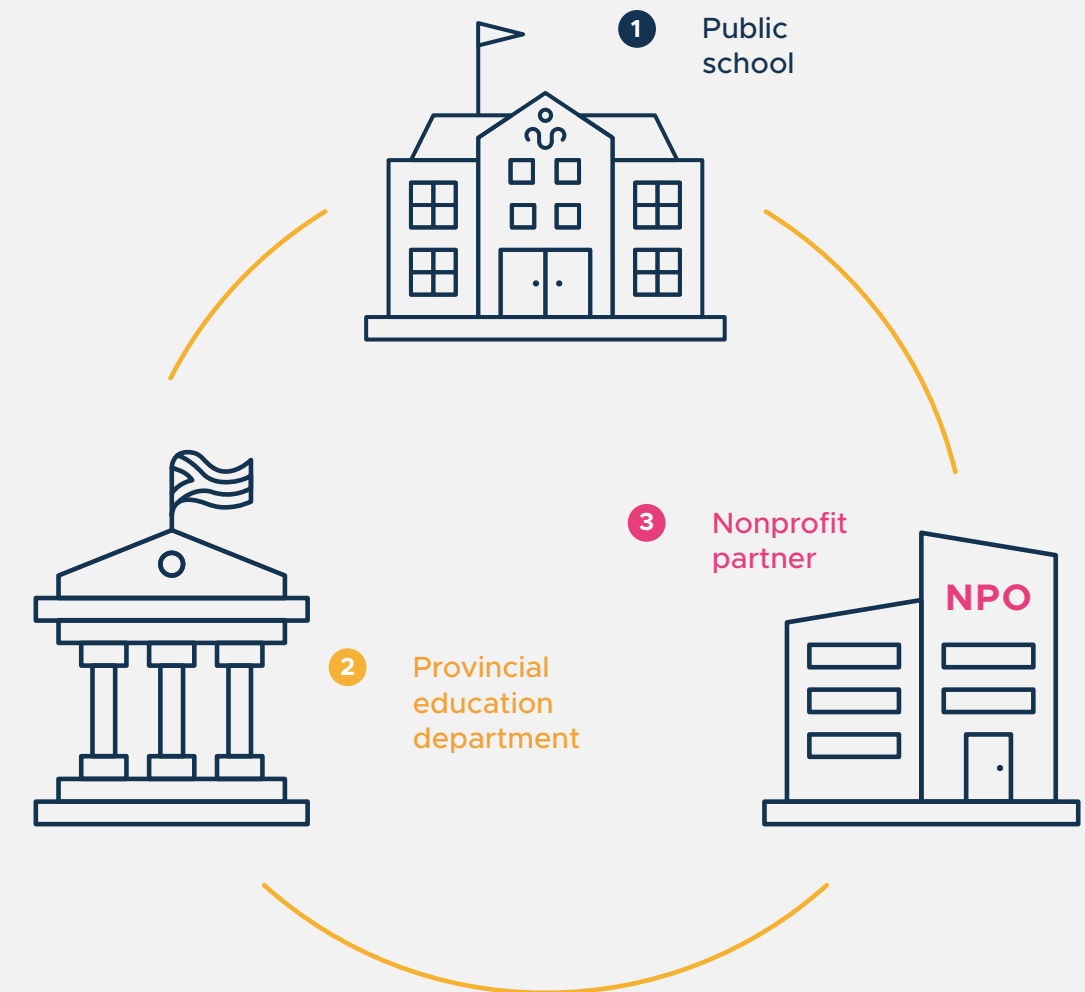
The SGB hires teachers directly using public funding, acting as an employer, and may hire additional staff above the government allocation. The provincial government and nonprofit partner are jointly responsible for the management of school leadership and a range of support services.

How do Partnership Schools work?

Partnership Schools in the Eastern Cape began in 2018 — first in AmaJingqi in the Amathole East District, and then in Mqanduli in the OR Tambo Inland District. The objective was to create and enable clusters of high-performing public schools in the Eastern Cape. The Partnership Schools model grew when the Northern Cape and North West adopted it in 2022 and 2024.

Common Good partners with three schools in the Northern Cape and works with four schools in the Western Cape. They are also involved in the North West province, where the project is at an early stage, and school communities have not yet chosen a nonprofit partner.

In the Eastern Cape, Axiom Education is currently the only organisation filling the role of nonprofit partner, with other community organisations increasingly interested in this work. As of May 2025, there are 13 Partnership Schools in the Eastern Cape, with more schools added each year. While the individual SGBs govern the schools independently, the SGBs also form a local “education council” which acts as a forum for peer accountability and support.



The partnership framework

The core partnership is between:

- 1 **A public school**, which is led by the principal and includes staff, parents, and the community;
- 2 **The provincial education department** (province, district, and circuit), which enters into a contractual relationship with and has oversight over the NPO;
- 3 **A nonprofit partner**, a civil society organisation that specialises in education management.

Partnerships aim to complement and strengthen government systems, not to replace them.

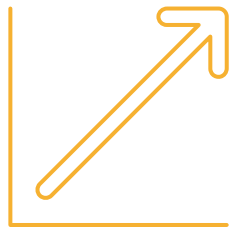
This deep partnership between schools, government, and nonprofits allows them to share successes and challenges, and makes the nonprofit more accountable to the other partners. This is something that often doesn't happen when NPOs run

stand-alone programmes in schools. The principal, who leads the school, shares responsibility for whole school improvement³ with the nonprofit partner. Meanwhile, the school team of educators and support staff are at the forefront of education delivery.

³Whole school improvement is a collaborative process aimed at strengthening all aspects of school life — teaching and learning, leadership, school culture, and community involvement — to ensure better outcomes for all learners.

There are three levers of change that underpin Public School Partnerships' objectives: Capacity, accountability, and flexibility.

1 **Greater capacity** through developing and upskilling school staff.



- School leadership (which includes the SGB, SMT, and teachers) has support from the partnership.

2 **Accountability** by creating spaces to develop accountable leaders.



- Each stakeholder (whether it be the NPO, SGB, SMT, or teachers) is accountable for ensuring that high-quality teaching and learning takes place in schools.

3 **Flexibility** through giving school leaders more leeway in the school environment — especially with their operational and compliance workload.



- This includes increased flexibility in teaching delivery and learning to best fit the needs of the learners within the schools.

In this sense, a partnership is different from a service provider model, which most schools are familiar with when working with NPOs. In the case of service provision, NPOs have little to no operational and leadership involvement. However, a partnership requires the NPO to be deeply involved in operations and leadership, making the relationship one of higher accountability. Both NPOs and schools are accountable to the broader school community and government, which includes the circuit, district, and province. Nonprofit partners also have responsibilities to their funders, which adds another layer of accountability.

By creating more lines of accountability between all stakeholders in the partnership, NPOs provide government and schools with extra capacity. Government gives schools and their nonprofit partners added flexibility in their educational and operational approaches because of the additional accountability.

For example, Axiom introduced additional capacity through teacher coaches and literacy facilitators in order to improve literacy in the foundation phase. Axiom then negotiated for flexibility so the facilitators could teach using a Teaching at the Right Level⁴ (TaRL) approach during timetabled lessons twice a week. This means Axiom has greater accountability for results in the form of external assessments, as they report on these to schools, districts, and funders.

These levers of change are especially important to keep in mind when structuring what each partnership will look like.



⁴Visit: www.teachingattherightlevel.org

Setting objectives, roles, and responsibilities

A well-structured public school partnership should ensure that government, funders, the school community, and the nonprofit partner agree on the partnership's purpose and outcomes from the beginning.

To develop effective partnership objectives, all partners should go through an independent consultation process to decide on goals, areas of flexibility, non-negotiables, and risks. This makes it possible to identify areas of agreement or disagreement, which then become the foundation for partners to negotiate and define clear objectives.

With clear objectives in place, the consultation process should then move on to define each stakeholder's roles and responsibilities.

When partners outline roles and responsibilities, they should remember the three main levers of any public school partnership:

- 1 Capacity
- 2 Accountability
- 3 Flexibility.

The objectives, roles, and responsibilities are formalised in legal agreements known as a memorandum of understanding (MOU) and a service-level agreement (SLA).



The legal framework: Memorandum of understanding and service-level agreement

In the Eastern Cape, the MOU outlines the agreement between funders and the Eastern Cape Department of Education. It defines the partnership's objectives, how the partnership will be implemented, and the funders' and provincial education department's responsibilities. One of the department's obligations is to enter into an SLA with a nonprofit partner.

The SLA establishes a partnership between the nonprofit partner, the provincial department of education, and the school. It gives the nonprofit partner its mandate to work with schools, and includes what programmes will apply to specific schools.

The SLA should include:

- Duration of partnership
- Partnership model
- Mechanisms to ensure accountability
- Development of School Improvement Plan (SIP)
- Information sharing
- Monitoring and evaluation
- Professional development
- Curriculum and assessment
- Resources
- Media
- Dispute resolution
- Termination
- Extension and renewal.

This contracting structure is flexible, and only a suggested guideline. Exact agreements and contractual obligations between different stakeholders will vary depending on the contracting partners and their needs. For examples or templates of an SLA or MOU, contact Public School Partnerships.⁴

⁴Email: Anthony Hall at anthony@publicschoolpartnerships.org

Iterative consultation and co-creation

The school, funder, NPO, and government department must agree on objectives and how to achieve them in order for the partnership to succeed. This consultation process is crucial, and all partners must be deeply involved to ensure the partnership model is co-created.

In the Northern Cape, this consultation process took 18 months before work began in schools in 2024.

A case study in co-creation: The Lesedi Solar Park Trust

The Lesedi Solar Park Trust in the Northern Cape has a mandate to invest in disadvantaged communities within a 50km radius of the solar park over a long-term period. There are 17 schools within the catchment area of the Lesedi Trust. This area includes the communities of Postmasburg, Skeyfontein, Jenn Haven, Danielskuil, Groenwater, and Lime Acres. Many of the schools in these communities are underperforming with low pass rates and leadership challenges.

Initially, the Lesedi Trust tried to tackle one challenge at a time. For example, the Trust introduced an after-school literacy programme that followed a traditional service provision approach. This was not effective enough, and in 2022, the Trust contacted Public School Partnerships to work together on an innovative whole school approach. The timing meant that we could use the learnings from Partnership Schools in the Eastern Cape and apply them in the Northern Cape, to reimagine what Partnership Schools could deliver with early input from communities.



“It was clear to us in interacting with the model that it required a lot more from the school and the department in terms of partnership. There was a give and take. It was wanting something more of a school and its leadership, to take ownership of certain things, and to behave in different ways. We saw that the way we would need to approach this was going to be different.”

Sinazo Nkwelo,
Lesedi Solar Park trustee

In November 2022, Public School Partnerships invited a few school principals, a circuit manager, and representatives from the Northern Cape Department of Education to Cape Town, to establish which schools the partnership model could work for. We introduced them to the partnership model through presentations and site visits to Collaboration Schools, so they could see how the nonprofit partners implemented real-world versions of the model at different schools.

After this visit, the provincial education department and schools in the area showed significant interest in developing a similar model, refined to suit the needs of the Danielskuil and Postmasburg school communities. An independent consultant specialising in education partnerships led a series of workshops to explore the possibility of a partnership between a group of nonprofit partners, the Lesedi Solar Park Trust, and several public schools. These workshops formed the building blocks of the months-long consultations that followed.

In July 2023, all stakeholders began to explore what a prospective partnership could look like. The process included a series of consultation sessions with focus groups to determine their respective interests, objectives, and conditions for a successful partnership. The focus groups were made up of nominated members from SMTs, SGBs, the Northern Cape Department of Education, and potential nonprofit partners. During the consultation process, the Public School Partnerships team drew insights, concerns, and opinions from the groups through targeted questioning and facilitation. We used the three key levers for effective public school partnerships (capacity, flexibility, and accountability) as focal points for discussion.

The consultation process then moved on to define the functions of the partnership, and exactly what the individual stakeholder's roles and responsibilities would be in each of these school improvement functions:

- Learner achievement
- Teaching and learning
- Behaviour and safety
- Leadership and management
- Governance, parents, and community⁵.

⁵These five areas of school functionality are taken from the Western Cape Schools Evaluation Authority's evaluation instrument, which can be found here: www.sea.westerncape.gov.za/evaluation-instrument

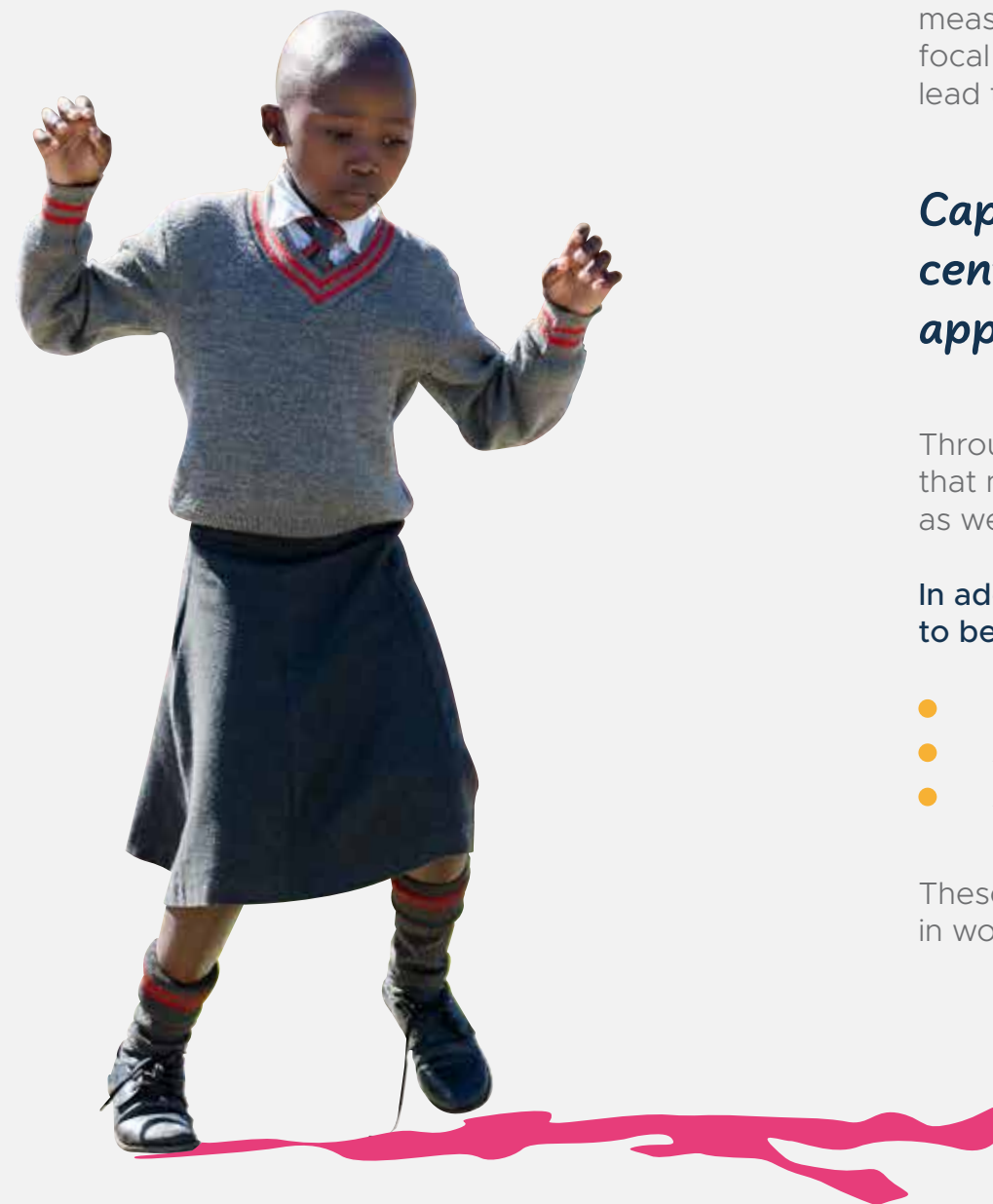
Becoming a school's nonprofit partner

Once the stakeholders reached agreement, they discussed a preferred partnership model. The agreed objectives and outcomes and the current legislative frameworks were used to determine the model. Public School Partnerships finalised the school requirements and shared them with possible nonprofit partners to see if there was the potential for a partnership.

We combined everything we learned from the workshops, and then called another meeting in the Northern Cape with all parties from Postmasburg. During this meeting, it became clearer where there was complete alignment, where there was disagreement, where compromise was possible, and whether a partnership framework was viable.

Three schools decided to adopt a public school partnership model, and participants selected Common Good as the preferred nonprofit partner for these three schools. We then drew up an SLA⁶ to reflect clearly defined objectives, levels of autonomy, roles, responsibilities, and key performance indicators.

Common Good began working with schools in the Northern Cape at the beginning of 2024.



Before nonprofits begin partnering with schools, they need to enter into partnerships with funders. This ensures that the school partnerships have the necessary financing, expertise, and staff and that they can maintain this capacity throughout the partnership. Funders can include institutional philanthropy, businesses, community groups, or individuals. Governments may also play a funding role in the future.

While every funder will have their own strategy, objectives, and impact measurement metrics that they hold NPOs to, there are certain strategic focal points and organisational requirements that are more likely to lead to successful school improvement.

Capacity, accountability, and flexibility should be central to any potential nonprofit partner's approach to school improvement.

Through quarterly reporting and annual proposals, funders can ensure that nonprofit partners apply these values within their own organisations, as well as in schools.

In addition to values alignment, any organisation that wants to become a nonprofit partner needs to have:

- Proven education expertise
- A theory of change
- A school improvement framework.

These three elements are the foundation for partnering with a school in working towards whole school improvement.

⁶As discussed in the section on SLAs and MOUs, the contracting structure is flexible, as is who signs them.

Theory of change

A theory of change is the strategic thinking that defines an organisation's work. It should describe the challenge the organisation wishes to tackle, the activities the organisation will offer, and how these activities are expected to lead to outcomes. It should be rooted in the organisation's strengths and capacity, as well as in an accurate assessment of how the challenge presents itself in the specific situations in which the organisation proposes to work.

The school, the nonprofit, a funder, or government may lead efforts to create a relationship between the school and nonprofit partner. A school, funder, or government may individually decide on a nonprofit partner but, more often, all three of these stakeholders make the selection. When these three stakeholders are considering partnering with a nonprofit, they should examine the nonprofit's theory of change to ensure that its work is grounded in experience within the education sector and strong school improvement theory. Because of the work's complexity, it should be clear that a nonprofit has done thorough research, has identified a clear theory for school improvement, and can show how this would work successfully in a school. Most schools have long lists of items that could be improved; unless the nonprofit stays focused on the most important levers of change, effort can very quickly decrease. A solid organisational theory of change is one of the selection criteria. However, later versions of an organisation's theory of change can be developed in consultation with government, funders, and schools based on how the nonprofit's work has evolved in schools.

When the nonprofit partner begins working with schools, the theory of change should be supplemented by a school-specific support offering and the school's SIP, discussed on page 52.

Organisational structure

Nonprofit partners should be NPOs as described in South African law, and registered with the Department of Social Development's nonprofit directorate.

A nonprofit partner may be:

- An existing organisation with established programmes that wants to adapt or grow its programmes for a public school partnership.
- A new organisation that doesn't use the public school partnership framework, but aims to help schools improve functionality.

Whether new or existing, an organisation may either already have funding or need to secure funding.

Public School Partnerships identified four capable nonprofit organisations that aligned with the programme's objectives, were best-placed to take on the role of a school's nonprofit partner, and had the following people involved:

- A CEO who is a good team leader, able to strategise, execute, engage effectively with stakeholders, and ideally able to fundraise.
- An educator (usually a former principal) who speaks the language of learning and can gain the respect of staff and community.
- An operations manager, who can support operational activities outside of classroom teaching.

Funder accountability role

Funders play a crucial role in the partnership. This is because, ultimately, the focus areas and programmes introduced are those that the funder is willing to maintain. While funders will have their own strategies and goals, they should be able to identify these in public school partnership models and objectives.

As in any funded programme, funder accountability requirements influence programme design, and in turn, the partnership.

Funders need to perform this accountability role with empathy and trust. Existing funders have maintained the balance between accountability and outcomes, and trust and autonomy, by using existing tools such as the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA), Early Grade Maths Assessment (EGMA)⁷, and systemic assessments⁸ in line with sector-wide best practices used by education nonprofits. Because these tools are in line with best practices for assessment, a nonprofit partner should be using them, or similar tools, to track and inform their work.

Partnering with government

Public school partnerships rely on mutual accountability between schools, nonprofit partners, and government. Many issues that impact school functionality are beyond the control of the school and the NPO. Addressing these issues requires strong, regular connections to government, particularly at the district level. This means it is important to establish structures,⁹ schedule regular meetings, and have good relationships with district directors and circuit managers. This can help unblock problems as they arise and extend the reach of innovation and learning into government systems.

A first step is to establish regular meeting patterns in the district with subject advisors, curriculum advisors, and circuit managers. At the beginning phase of the project, these might be monthly meetings. As relationships and project implementation become more stable, these meetings can happen quarterly.

In Axiom's experience, most government officials quickly see the value of public school partnerships and have good intentions to support the work. The better the nonprofit partner is able to express how their goals align with the district's goals, the more likely the district will be to support its work.

In practice, it can be hard to hold regular meetings. This isn't a major obstacle as long as communication happens regularly (via WhatsApp or another convenient virtual platform) and there is forward momentum. If regular meetings do not happen and enough agenda items build up, then there is a clear case for requesting a meeting.

⁷More information on EGRA and EGMA can be found here: www.shared.rti.org/content

⁸Systemic assessments are conducted in the Western Cape for Grades 3, 6 and 9 to test language and mathematics skills.

⁹In Axiom's experience, this has been a working group at district level that includes the relevant heads of units who interact with Axiom on a regular basis.

Starting a Partnership School

Nonprofits may be approached by a school for partnership. Alternatively, nonprofit partners can identify potential schools through local communities or leaders, through existing relationships they may have with schools, through funders who might want to fund specific schools or communities, or through provincial education departments.

After identifying potential schools, the nonprofit should have an exploratory conversation with the SMT so the two parties can share more about themselves. Then, if both are keen to take things forward, the nonprofit can engage more deeply with the SGB and staff. This is an opportunity for the school to share information about its policies, practices, finances, and needs, and for both parties to discuss how best the nonprofit could help the school improve. The school will also learn more about what the partnership model looks like, and the specific offering that the NPO brings to the partnership.

Here are some of the questions that Axiom asks to decide whether to start a partnership with a school:

Primary considerations:

- Does the organisation have the capacity for this work?
 - Can the organisation realistically do the work?
 - Does the organisation have the experience, track record, and sufficient funding for a multi-year partnership?
- Does it make sense to do the work?
 - Is the work the nonprofit would be doing with the school aligned with the organisation's objectives and strategic direction?
 - Is the work practically viable? For example, the partnership will be difficult to sustain if the school is far away from central offices and core staff.
- Is success likely?
 - Can the work achieve Public School Partnerships' objectives?

If the answer to any of these questions is "no," then conditions are not right for a partnership and the nonprofit should consider approaching another school.

If the answers to all of these primary considerations are “yes,” then the nonprofit should look at the following questions to inform its planning:

Secondary considerations, in order of importance:

- Is there a capable, strong principal who is willing to hold staff accountable, be an instructional leader, is open to partnership and support and, ideally, has shown that they can lead change?
- Does the SMT want a partnership, and has it shown a willingness to do things differently and embrace new ideas?
- Does the SGB understand the partnership, and is it 100% committed to the work?
- Do the vision, values, and drive of the school align well with those of the nonprofit partner?
- Is the school a no-fee, non-selective public school?¹⁰
- If you were to think about growing in the future, does the school form part of a feeder-school cluster with several schools that could be potential partner schools?
- Is the school operating under severe constraints that could not be easily solved by the organisation or government within the first year of partnership?
 - For example, suppose there is overcrowding with 100 learners per classroom. Unless government or another stakeholder builds more classrooms within the first year of operation, the partnership is not likely to succeed. If the school is just one classroom short, the nonprofit partner or government might be able to build another classroom within the first year, timeously resolving the issue and allowing the partnership to move forward.
- Do the majority (at least 60%) of staff at the school show a willingness to partner and a growth mindset, even if they need a nudge from leadership?

- Is the school open to information sharing, and willing to share key data such as attendance records and financial information?
- Does the school have a strict admission policy, or is it willing to develop one so that it maintains reasonable learner numbers relative to classroom spaces? The school needs to have capacity and a sufficient number of buildings to accommodate all learners without overcrowding.
- Is the school open to developing and committing to strong policies and practices around child protection, corporal punishment, sexual harassment, and other mission-critical policies?
- Is there a sufficient relationship of trust and goodwill to develop a partnership from?

If the answer is “no” to most of the secondary considerations, the nonprofit should carefully consider if the school is ready for partnership. If the answer is “yes” to most secondary considerations, the nonprofit should note the areas of concern, but may still be able to begin a viable partnership.



¹⁰Non-selective schools are schools that do not have performance-based entry criteria.

Building strong partnership foundations

Trust is crucial to establishing a successful partnership. The following foundations should be in place to start building a trusting relationship between the nonprofit partner and the school:

- **Clear objectives and expectations:** The nonprofit partner and the school should work together to ensure they agree on objectives and how to achieve them. They should also have backup plans in place in case the original plans fail. The SLA between the school and the nonprofit should clearly define expectations and lines of accountability.
- **Good communication:** The nonprofit, school, and provincial education department must have clear lines of communication between them. In Axiom's context, a school development manager, who represents the nonprofit, meets for a monthly check-in with the circuit manager, who represents the Eastern Cape Department of Education. The school development manager visits schools regularly for check-ins and support meetings with the principal and the SMT, informed by a quarterly programme the nonprofit shares with the school at the beginning of each term. The school development manager, principal, and circuit manager can share more informal updates via phone/WhatsApp.
- **Reciprocal accountability:** Nonprofit partners can ask more of schools if, and only if, the partners can offer schools the support they need to achieve what the nonprofit requires of them.¹¹ Experience has shown that the nonprofit is a catalyst for progress when schools are willing to engage with the nonprofit and are functioning well in most areas. In these cases, accountability is not an issue because the school is already performing reasonably well. When the nonprofit encounters a school that is not functioning well, it takes more effort to achieve the momentum needed for change. This means that the nonprofit must be more present to make accountability part of the school's leadership structures.

- **Shared vision:** The school and the nonprofit partner set this together — it is the main goal they agree to work collaboratively to achieve. Because one of the first things the NPO does is help the partner school develop and improve its vision, this shared vision also guides the partnership.
- **Shared values:** These are the everyday values used to achieve the main goal, e.g. excellence, integrity, or commitment. The school and the NPO develop the values they believe will lead to a successful partnership together.

¹¹Elmore, R. (2002). Bridging the gap between standards and achievement: The imperative for professional development in education. Albert Shanker Institute; Grant, C.M. et al. (2009). Secondary lenses on learning participant book: Team leadership for mathematics in middle and high schools. SAGE



Schools are more likely to make changes that improve learners' results if they are places of high trust.¹² Because of this, trust is essential to making positive changes in schools.

Axium's approach to building trust has been to ensure consistency and value in every interaction with schools. This involves showing up regularly, keeping to schedules, calling meetings respectfully, and ensuring people benefit from each meeting or training. At the start of Axium's work with schools in the AmaJingqi community, teachers were understandably suspicious of this new partnership and were concerned that their jobs might be at risk. It took years of building trust through consistent, day-to-day supportive actions before teachers felt comfortable and able to fully embrace having coaches in their classrooms and nonprofit partners in their schools. Clear communication and a trusting relationship have made it possible to handle misunderstandings and differences of opinion.



¹²Bryk, A. S., & Schneider, B. (2002). Trust in schools: A core resource for improvement. Russell Sage Foundation.

Practically, this means:

- In the early stages of engagement, being open and transparent about how schools are selected and what they can expect from the partnership is crucial. This helps to ease the natural worries many educators have about job security or increased work pressure. Axium repeats the phrase: “Yes, we are expecting you to work hard and improve, but for every improvement we ask of you, you can expect the same amount of support from us to get there”.
- Existing Partnership Schools are likely to be the biggest advocates and champions for the model. There are opportunities to build trust by bringing SGB and SMT members from these schools to speak to prospective schools about what the partnership has looked like for them. There may also be opportunities to introduce the work through collaborative forums like SMT retreats or communities of practice.
- Once the partnership is in place, it is important that educators see the value of meetings and training sessions. It is also essential that these do not take the educators away from other priorities, particularly classroom time. This means consulting with educators about the times, preferred topics, and venues for meetings and training sessions. Training sessions should be packed with value for teachers and leaders. The sessions should address specific challenges and opportunities that have been identified in their day-to-day work, and which positively impact teaching practice. In the early phases of the partnership, training is not followed up by coaching because the focus is on building good culture and leadership foundations first.
- As the partnership matures, maintaining openness and transparency makes it easier to have difficult conversations. This approach also enables accountability that is respectful and supportive rather than punitive.
- Try to work with people who are from, have worked in, or know the community. Most of the Axium staff have worked in the schools and communities in which Axium works, and this has been a crucial part of Axium's success in building trusting relationships. Because the staff were already known and trusted, it was easier to build relationships.

Baseline assessments

Baseline assessments measure how schools are performing in terms of teaching and learning. They are a useful tool to understand how a potential or new partner school is performing academically.

Literacy and numeracy skills are the foundation for much of the learning that happens throughout school. International studies show that South African learners lag behind their peers in similar contexts in literacy and numeracy.¹³ Conducting baseline assessments of these core skills is important to make sure that programmes provide learners with appropriate academic support. They also provide a baseline to evaluate school improvement throughout the duration of the partnership.

Baseline assessments are typically conducted in June of the year before the partnership starts. This timing takes into account a number of factors to ensure the assessments work for the school, the learners, and the nonprofit.

Partnership Schools participate in the Common Schools Assessments (CSAs) every June. The nonprofit partner Common Good leads the CSAs, which are written by all current and potential Partnership Schools. This is done to assess literacy and numeracy¹⁴ in schools in the absence of national, standardised measures in South Africa. CSAs can be used as a baseline assessment.

If baseline assessments need to be conducted outside of the CSAs timeline, Axiom uses EGRA for foundation phase, and EGMA for Grade 3. Axiom uses JumpTrak¹⁵ and Green Shoots¹⁶ for Grades 6 and 9.

Independent external invigilators should conduct the assessments to ensure fair administration. To accomplish this, Axiom has used invigilators from one area to invigilate in a different area.

The results of the baseline assessments are the standards that schools and their partners use to measure improvement, identify trends, and then strategise accordingly. This lets both parties build out a contextually relevant partnership support programme.

¹³Department of Basic Education. (2024). South African 2023 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) highlights report; Department of Basic Education. (2023). PIRLS 2021: South African preliminary highlights report.

¹⁴The CSAs assess home language and mathematics.

¹⁵Visit: www.jumptrak.co.za

¹⁶Visit: vwww.maths.gsed.co.za

Choosing a school improvement approach

A school improvement approach consists of the key factors that contribute towards positive changes in the school and learner outcomes. The approach should be informed by an organisation's theory of change and relevant education literature. A nonprofit partner's education programme is the set of practical activities that an NPO helps implement in order to strengthen the key factors outlined in the school improvement approach. The education programme should be informed by an organisation's theory of change, relevant education literature, and the unique set of capabilities the nonprofit partner may have on their team. While there is significant overlap and interaction between a theory of change, a school improvement approach, and an education programme, they are separate entities.

Nonprofit partners support and empower schools four main methods:

- 1 Planning and accountability**, which involves supporting SMTs and SGBs to develop effective SIPs and set goals and targets, and helping the SMT to hold teaching and support staff accountable to the targets set in the SIP.
- 2 Supporting the SGB** in selecting and hiring school leadership, and hiring teaching staff.
- 3 Leadership development** through training and empowering SMTs to be strong instructional leaders who drive the professional development of teaching staff.
- 4 Supporting teaching staff** to improve the quality of teaching and learning through professional development, classroom support, and teaching materials.

Numbers 3 and 4 form the basis for each partner’s education programme, which aims to improve learner outcomes. While excellent planning and management are at the core of any public school partnership, an education programme is vital to ensure successful teaching and learning.

Every nonprofit partner should have an education programme that guides how they undertake instructional leadership development and support teaching staff. The education programme will need to respond to individual schools’ needs, so its implementation may vary across schools. However, the programme must be clear in defining how the nonprofit will support improvement in teaching and learning. For example, the 5Essentials school improvement framework¹⁷ and the concept of the “instructional core”¹⁸ underpin Axiom’s education programme, which includes instructional leadership coaching, teacher coaching, and literacy support.



¹⁷Visit: www.uchicagoimpact.org/our-offerings/5essentials

¹⁸City, E.A. et al. 2009. Instructional rounds in education: A network approach to improving teaching and learning. Harvard Education Press. City et al. (2009) refer to the “instructional core” as the relationship between learner, teacher, and content. It is at the heart of teaching and learning. Any changes that schools make — for example, building a new classroom, using technology, or introducing a new textbook — must impact the instructional core if the school wants to improve its learning outcomes. At the centre of this triangle is the task — the actual work that learners are doing in a class.

Conceptualising an education programme

A school improvement framework is an excellent starting point if organisations don’t have a solid education programme, or if they need to adapt an existing programme. A conceptual framework outlines the most important factors affecting improvement in schools — essentially “what counts for improvement”. The framework is normally a list of several factors, typically starting with leadership and including school culture and teaching quality. As with a theory of change, a nonprofit partner’s beliefs about how improvement happens will be unique and shaped by their own experiences, ideologies, the schools they work in, and school improvement theory.

School improvement frameworks are a useful way to conceptualise support offerings. Once nonprofit partners are clear on what factors “count,” they can create plans to improve these areas.

Axiom has used the 5Essentials framework, which focuses on these five factors as the essential building blocks of a great school:

- 1 Effective leaders
- 2 Involved families
- 3 Collaborative teachers
- 4 A supportive environment
- 5 Ambitious teaching.

Another possible framework is ARK’s Six Pillars,¹⁹ which focuses on:

- 1 High expectations
- 2 Excellent teaching
- 3 Knowing each child
- 4 Depth for breadth
- 5 Exemplary behaviour
- 6 Always learning to guide school improvement.

¹⁹Visit: www.arkteachertraining.org/guiding-principles-the-six-pillars-of-ark-schools-2

A school improvement framework should:

- Align with and enhance existing government curricula, tools, templates, and processes to ensure that schools can fulfil the criteria required by the Department of Basic Education (DBE). The NPO can try to improve upon existing systems, but should ensure that these improvements are compatible with government processes so that a school does not have to work with two different systems.
- Make a clear case for any innovations and flexibility, both of which must be agreed upon in partnership with the provincial education department district.
- Consider how any innovations could make their way back into the broader education system to improve a wider group of schools.

Each party should use the framework that best fits their organisation, schools, and context. Schools are complex, with many moving parts. With endless time and budget, a nonprofit partner could do many helpful things, but it is very important to make difficult choices so that effort is focused on the few things that are likely to improve learning the most.

This starts with being clear on what these few things are, and then being disciplined to avoid distractions and scope creep.

Once the organisation has a school improvement framework, the next step is to develop an education programme. This is the set of practical activities that the nonprofit partner executes in order to strengthen the levers identified for school improvement.

Here are some important questions for a nonprofit partner to consider before defining its education programme:

- What are the organisation's strengths?
- What are the school's improvement needs?
- What will lead to sustained whole school improvement over the school's lifetime? Sustained improvement isn't just about improving the matric pass rate with extra matric tutoring; it's about changing the teaching and learning culture of the school.

Below is a set of education support offerings based on which a nonprofit might partner with a school. It's not a complete list, but rather a set of ideas to start from:

- Instructional leadership training and coaching
- Teacher coaching to support teachers' professional development
- Literacy and numeracy catch-up for foundation phase learners
- Extra maths and language lessons for high school learners
- Data-driven instruction training
- Hiring more teachers and administrators, freeing up the principal and SMT to be instructional leaders
- Digital learning and resources.



These three levers are at the core of any public school partnership:

- The additional capacity that nonprofit partners support schools with.
- The flexibility that government grants schools and their nonprofit partners to pursue school improvement.
- Additional accountability mechanisms for both the school and nonprofit to ensure they meet their goals.

A phased approach to school improvement acknowledges that schools are all at different points in the school improvement journey.

With a potentially overwhelming list of things to do, a phased approach helps the nonprofit and school identify key priorities and structure their approach to school improvement. This is useful because it allows the partners to spread the long-term work over time while focusing on two to three manageable goals annually. It also allows for the most effective use of finite resources, at a time when they can have the most impact.

The experiences of many South African nonprofit partners, as well as the school improvement literature, support the phased approach.²⁰

²⁰Hopkins, D., Harris, A., & Jackson, D. (1997). Understanding the school's capacity for development: Growth states and strategies. *School Leadership & Management*, 17(3), 401–412. Visit: [www.doi.org/10.1080/13632439769944](https://doi.org/10.1080/13632439769944)

School leadership development

Effective leadership is the foundation of school improvement. Good leadership is second only to a good teacher in the classroom in terms of its contribution to improving academic outcomes for learners.²¹

The success of any public school partnership depends upon excellent leadership. Excellent schools are led by outstanding leadership teams, and leaders flourish when they receive support to develop in their roles. However, resource constraints in many public schools demand that principals spend most of their time on administration and teaching, leaving little time to support and develop the staff they lead.

The nonprofit partner's role is to develop both the management and instructional skills of SMTs through training and coaching. In larger schools, with staffing complements that include SMTs made up of the principal, multiple Heads of Department, and deputy principal posts, leadership development will focus on the principal and SMT in relation to their respective roles. In smaller schools,²² the focus will be on supporting the principal. This is because there typically aren't enough teachers in management, making it difficult to provide leadership development beyond the principal.



²¹Leithwood, K., Harris, A., & Hopkins, D. (2019). Seven strong claims about successful school leadership revisited. *School Leadership & Management*, 40(1), 5–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2019.1596077>; Short, P. M., & Greer, J. T. (1997). *Leadership in empowered schools: Themes from innovative efforts*. Merrill.

²²Axiom defines small schools as having three teachers in total.

Strengthening management and leadership skills

SMTs in no-fee public schools face complex leadership challenges while working within a severely constrained financial environment. Nonprofit partners play a crucial supporting role by developing the management and leadership skills these leaders need to effectively tackle these challenges. Research²³ shows that effective school leaders demonstrate four “domains of practice”.

Axiom has focused on these domains, applied to a rural South African context:

- 1

Set direction:

 - Support the SMT and SGB to refine or create the vision, mission, values, and critical policies of the school.
 - Support the SMT and Representative Council of Learners to lead culture by introducing and monitoring effective routines towards a more orderly environment.
 - Develop and monitor the SIP.
- 2

Build relationships and develop people: See the “instructional leadership” section below.
- 3

Develop the organisation to support desired practices:

 - Train the principal to effectively lead teams and hold staff accountable.
 - Strengthen the SMT’s efforts to engage parents, community, and government structures towards school improvement work.
- 4

Improve the instructional programme: See the “instructional leadership” on the next page.

What successful school leaders do
(adapted from Leithwood et al. 2019)²⁴

Domains of practice	Specific leadership practices:
Set directions	- Identify specific, shared, short-term goals - Create high-performance expectations - Communicate the vision and goals
Build relationships and Develop people	- Stimulate growth in the professional capacities of staff - Provide support and demonstrate consideration for individual staff members - Model the school's values and practices - Build trusting relationships with and among staff, learners and parents - Establish productive working relationships with teacher union representatives
Develop the organisation to support desired practices	- Build collaborative culture and distribute leadership - Structure the organisation to facilitate collaboration - Build productive relationships with families and communities - Connect the school to its wider environment - Maintain a safe and healthy school environment - Allocate resources in support of the school's vision and goals
Improve the instructional Program	- Staff the instructional programme - Provide instructional support - Monitor student learning and school improvement progress - Buffer staff from distractions to their instructional work

²³Leithwood, Harris & Hopkins. *School Leadership & Management*, 40(1), 5–22; Paxton, C. (2015). *Possibilities and constraints for improvement in rural South African schools*. Unpublished thesis. University of Cape Town

²⁴Leithwood, Harris & Hopkins. *School Leadership & Management*, 40(1), 5–22.

Instructional leadership

Instructional leadership repositions the primary work of school leaders as improving teaching and learning at the school, rather than administration. Instructional leadership emphasises a consistent focus on academic improvement and creating a school environment that promotes effective teaching and learning, and academic progress. It can have a huge impact on learner outcomes because it enables the principal and their team to lead teaching and learning in their school, and to better support their teachers.

Instructional leadership practices include school walks,²⁵ classroom observation and feedback, and the use of data to inform decision-making. The nonprofit partner's instructional coaching staff initially provide support for instructional leadership. They help each SMT member grow as an instructional leader within the scope of their role, with the end goal being that the SMT will own and run these practices themselves.

Axium's instructional coaches have worked with methodology brought to South Africa through the Instructional Leadership Institute, which Axium has then adapted for a rural South African context.²⁶ Axium's coaches are responsible for the initial training of the principal and SMT, and for ongoing coaching to cement these practices. Axium has chosen to focus on coaching the principal and other SMT members, as they are most likely to become instructional leaders at the school. Teachers of critical subjects such as maths and science also receive instructional coaching.

Data-driven instruction is a critical element of instructional leadership. Part of the support a nonprofit partner provides to the principal and SMT is helping to establish and affirm a data culture. This includes tracking attendance, learner achievement, and learning gaps. This data enables teachers to reteach in a targeted way, and can help the principal and SMT figure out if an educator might need more support with their instructional practice. When done properly, data-driven instruction is a valuable tool for school leadership to spot high-level gaps and strategise towards school improvement in a more focused way.



²⁵A school walk is an observation practice of walking around a school, and viewing practices in and outside of a classroom, with a purposeful set of objectives and questions in place.

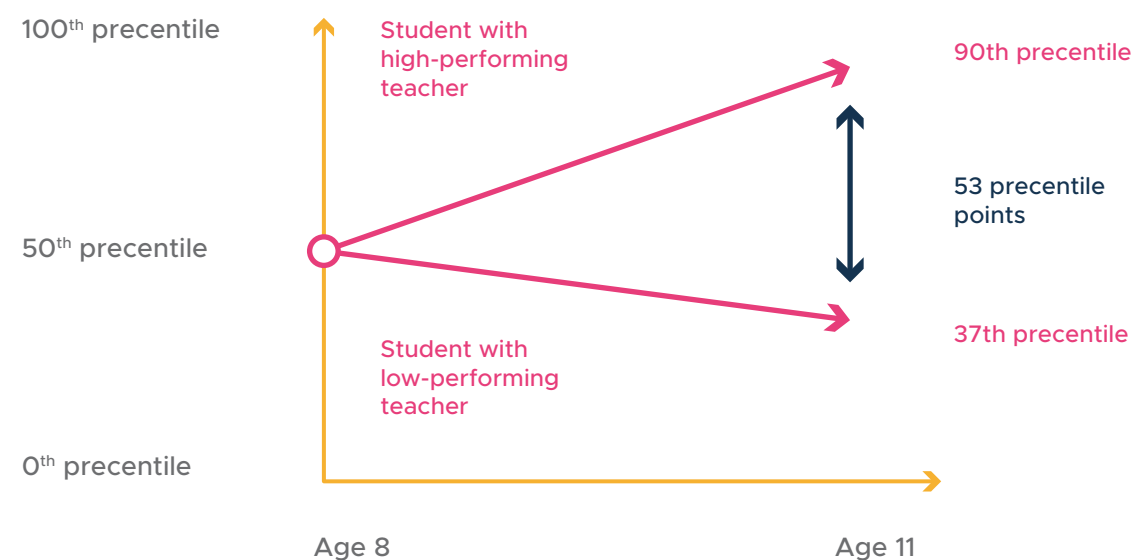
²⁶Visit: www.ili.education/

Teacher professional development

Teachers in no-fee public schools have to manage many challenges outside of their teaching responsibilities. This leaves very little time and capacity to focus on developing their professional skills. However, since improving teaching practice is one of the best-tested ways to improve learner outcomes²⁷ professional development needs to be a major focus for nonprofit partners.

The effect of teacher quality on learners' performance over time (Sanders & Rivers, 1996)²⁸

Student performance



Professional development has a very specific meaning within a South African education context. The South African Council of Educators mandates that all teachers attend ongoing professional development sessions and earn a certain number of professional development points every year. Professional development could take the form of instructional training aimed at improving

teaching practice, or it could be culture-focused, like developing strong entry routines. In an ideal world, once-off courses should be followed up with coaching and individual support to ensure that teachers are implementing the skills they learned in training. In turn, this individualised support will be key to identifying further gaps that will inform choices about future training.

Provincial departments of education in South Africa typically run professional development through fairly generic, workshop-style training. Given that subject advisors can sometimes be responsible for supporting hundreds of schools, education departments have limited capacity to do the follow-up coaching work that would encourage training to “stick”. This is where nonprofit partners have an opportunity to provide professional development that meets teachers’ needs or requests for assistance and supports their professional growth, and to follow up on training with regular coaching.

Some ways for partners to provide teacher professional development include:

- **Training using** a “See it, Name it, Do it” (“Yijonge, Yichaze, Yenze” in Axiom’s isiXhosa adaptation) methodology, which ensures educators practice the skill they are learning.²⁹
- **Communities of practice** that bring together teachers in the same phase or subject to learn from and support each other as educators. Initially, coaches or nonprofit partner representatives might lead these meetings, which could be held weekly, fortnightly, or monthly. But the focus must be on sharing best practices that resolve peers’ challenges. Ideally, the coaches should hand over the communities of practice to be “owned” by their members. Some external encouragement may still be useful to ensure that members prioritise the communities of practice meetings.
- **Co-planning and one-on-one support** that help teachers with lesson planning and developing their content knowledge.
- **Coaching in the form of classroom observation and real-time feedback**, providing teachers with immediate input to strengthen their classroom practice.

²⁷Barber, M., & Mourshed, M. (2007). How the world’s best-performing school systems come out on top. McKinsey & Company. Visit: www.mckinsey.com/industries/education/our-insights/how-the-worlds-best-performing-school-s ystems-come-out-on-top

²⁸Sanders, B., & Rivers, J. C. (1996). *Cumulative effects of teachers on future student academic performance*. University of Tennessee Value-Added Research and Assessment Center.

²⁹More information on this methodology can be found in Bambrick-Santoyo, P. (2018). *Leverage leadership 2.0: A practical guide to building exceptional schools*. Jossey-Bass.

School governing body (SGB) development

SGBs are an important vehicle for parental involvement, and a well-functioning SGB is essential in supporting and holding school management accountable. Nonprofit partners are co-opted onto Partnership Schools' SGBs. This co-option is provided for under the South African Schools Act that governs all public schools. Co-opted members do not have any voting rights on the SGB, but are co-opted because of their expert knowledge, which supports the SGB in its governance and oversight role.

SGB members are required to manage finances, sit on hiring panels, and help revise existing policies or draft new ones. However, parents often don't have the background or skills to do this effectively, which is where a school's nonprofit partner can provide additional technical support. A nonprofit partner provides this support through training, workshops, and monitoring in line with priorities identified in the SIP.



Nonprofit partners support SGBs in five key areas:

- 1 Developing a SIP in collaboration with the SMT.
- 2 Creating school policies:
 - Nonprofit partners familiarise SGB members with the relevant existing school policies, help them understand their roles and responsibilities, and support them in understanding how school leadership, management, and governance fit together.
 - Nonprofit partners also help the SGBs develop new school policies or review and amend existing ones in line with the South African Schools Act.
- 3 Recruiting and recommending staff for appointment to new posts. This is particularly the case for SGB posts, where the SGB is the formal employer, but where the SGB also has a key role in ensuring a strong recruitment process for all government-employed posts. The nonprofit partner trains and advises the SGB on the kinds of criteria, assessment tasks, and processes that will ensure they recruit the best possible teachers to the school.
- 4 Managing school funds:
 - An essential element of SGB development is training the finance committee on how best to manage the school's finances together with the principal and school finance officer. It is important that the SGB and SMT agree on financial management, and that SGB members have the necessary financial skills to fulfil their oversight role and properly record financial transactions. This in turn promotes transparency at all levels.
 - Good financial management can help a school focus on critical maintenance priorities and support services. The goals outlined in the SIP need to be within the approved annual budget.
- 5 Parental engagement:
 - Schools with involved parents and communities have been shown to increase learner achievement.³⁰ The SGB plays a vital connecting and mobilising role between the school and parents. The nonprofit partner provides training and coaching of the SGB to strengthen this part of their work.
 - Nonprofit partners act as a liaison between the education council and schools to encourage SGB chairpersons, alongside principals, to make use of the forum.

³⁰Bryk, A. S., Sebring, P. B., Allensworth, E., Easton, J. Q., & Luppescu, S. (2010). *Organizing schools for improvement: Lessons from Chicago*. University of Chicago Press.

Other training areas a nonprofit partner might support SGBs are sessions on how to chair and run meetings, introducing elections, or explaining the role and implementation of the school constitution. This is in addition to the SGB training that the education department may provide. Each nonprofit partner will need to tailor its support offering depending on the SGB's needs.



“When there are high levels of transparency among the teachers, principal, SMT, and SGB, you minimise the risk of serious financial mismanagement or abuse.”

Babalwa Mtumtum,

Axiom school development manager,
AmaJingqi Public School Partnerships

The role of a nonprofit partner is to make sure SGB members feel, and are, supported to fulfil their governance roles. Nonprofit partners should make themselves available for additional ad hoc training and support that the SGB might request. Together with the SMT, they should monitor the SGB's implementation of its annual goals as outlined in the SIP.

Enabling environment

Teachers and learners need to be in an environment that is conducive to teaching and learning in order to flourish. Each school's needs will be different, and nonprofits should consult with schools as to how best they can contribute to a more enabling environment. This may include taking on operational and administrative work, training current staff, hiring temporary staff to fill skills gaps, or conducting learner support programmes.

Additional capacity

It is important to have a conversation with the school about where staff would be most needed to create the necessary enabling environment. Depending on the type of partnership, the school's needs, and the NPO's capacity, additional teachers or staff could:

- Strategically focus on key subjects
- Run literacy or numeracy support programmes
- Provide administrative support like data capturing for the South African School Administration and Management System (SA-SAMS), the government data management system, which can inform data-driven instruction.

Nonprofits should refer to the phased approach to school improvement (page 60) to see at which stages capacity should be added.

Note that while additional staffing capacity is a popular request from schools, there are several considerations that the nonprofit partner should think carefully about:

- Additional teaching staff are relatively expensive — will this be affordable?
- Additional staff can create dependency that makes them difficult to remove in the future — is this sustainable?
- If running a network of schools, it is hard to employ additional staff at one school and not others — is this equitable and scalable?
- Additional staff may mask underlying performance issues that need addressing — is this building the school's long-term resilience and capacity?

One strategy that may mitigate some of these concerns is to employ additional staff, such as education assistants, through government employment programmes like the Social Employment Fund or the Basic Education Employment Initiative. The nonprofit partner can then provide the training and support needed to ensure these young people are effectively deployed in schools.



Academic support programmes

Academic support programmes are important because they help close gaps in learning and lead to improved learner outcomes. The first step to figuring out what an academic support offering should look like is finding out what gaps exist, in order to build an offering that caters to schools' needs.

When building academic support programmes, the following is important:

- Any academic support programme must be responsive to schools' needs and existing gaps. However, a nonprofit partner should make sure that these gaps can't be addressed through additional management or teaching support. Learning support programmes should be implemented only when existing support cannot address the gaps. For example, some learners may have low achievement across subjects because they enter high school at a primary school reading level. Supporting teachers or trying to reduce class sizes won't bridge this particular gap.
- Where possible, try to build support programmes into existing school rhythms. Using sessions already in the timetable with a different pedagogical approach is less disruptive to teaching and learning, but still allows for the bridging of learning gaps. Group reading periods in primary schools or study sessions before and after lessons in high schools are common and can be used effectively. For example, Axiom's literacy support programme uses the group guided reading periods already embedded in the school timetable, and structures the sessions using the TaRL methodology.³¹ Another option is holding extra lessons or study sessions before or after school, but these come with challenges when scholar transport is involved.
- While the content of academic support programmes tends to be the focus, sometimes the delivery isn't given enough attention. Carefully consider how the content, methodology, and delivery will work in different contexts with different gaps. For example, if learners don't have a good grasp of English, then an English-based digital programme won't work very well.

³¹www.teachingattherightlevel.org/the-tarl-approach

- An academic support programme goes further than simply providing additional resources, like exam preparation books, tablets, or digital resources. These rarely have any significant impact on learning by themselves.³² For additional resources to have an impact on learning, they need to be used as tools within a holistic support programme.

Non-academic learner support

Non-academic support is important because it helps address various external barriers that prevent children from learning. Before children can learn, they need to feel safe and have their basic needs met. For example, an after-school programme must consider whether learners can take public transport home safely. When starting learner support programmes, organisations that don't have the expertise in social work, for example, can partner with other organisations for expert support.

Non-academic learner support programmes can include:

- Top-up nutrition programmes³³
- Psycho-social support³⁴
- Eye and hearing tests
- Learning concessions.³⁵

Learners also need to be motivated for what happens beyond school. A child's future orientation has a big impact on their learning. Nonprofit partners can offer career guidance and support to high school learners, helping them figure out their career goals, choose subjects, and apply to various tertiary institutions.

³²Akyeampong, K. et al. (2023). Cost-effective approaches to improve global learning. FCDO, the World Bank, UNICEF, and USAID. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/teachingandlearning/publication/cost-effective-approaches-to-improve-global-learning>

³³Most public schools are part of the government nutrition programme. This may be the one meal that they receive in the day. If learners stay after school hours, there is a need for additional nutrition.

³⁴If the nonprofit partner isn't able to employ social workers directly, it can partner with an organisation like Community Keepers: www.communitykeepers.org

³⁵Learning concessions are provided for learners who face barriers to learning and could benefit from alternative assessment methods or additional time when writing assessments. These accommodations allow learners to demonstrate their knowledge.

Physical environment

Almost every public school in South Africa has infrastructure and maintenance needs that far outrun available budgets. Partners should ensure schools are safe and dignified spaces. At the same time, partners should be strategic about the infrastructure work they focus on, given that it is not the focus of the partnership and, as a result, has a limited budget.

Axiom focuses on these four areas of the physical environment:

- **Safety:** Where there is a serious safety concern that might cause harm to learners or teachers, for example, pit latrines.
- **Valuing people and dignity:** There is a deep legacy from apartheid that has led to many schools being in a state of disrepair. School staff should have dignified working conditions, and schools should be dignified spaces for children to learn. A dignified environment shows respect for the dignity of the people in that environment. For example, a litter-free playground and clean classrooms are happier spaces for both staff and learners.
- **Connections to learning:** Upgrades need to be strategically related to learning. It should be clear as to how an upgrade will advance learning objectives. For example, a classroom upgrade usually achieves more learning objectives than a remodelled staffroom.
- **A simple facelift:** A new coat of paint can signal the school's fresh start as a Partnership School.

It is important that the nonprofit partner discusses physical improvements with the school before starting any costly projects. The SIP process includes good financial management. As part of this process, the SGB or SMT can identify an area that needs fixing, and the school can contribute to the funding with school fundraising efforts. School funds tend to be limited, and the nonprofit may have to pay for a substantial portion of the work, but the school contribution will instil a sense of ownership in the physical improvements.

It may be beneficial to source additional funds for infrastructure upgrades. However, the nonprofit partner's work to strengthen the school management's systems for maintaining existing infrastructure will be more important in contributing to sustained school improvement.

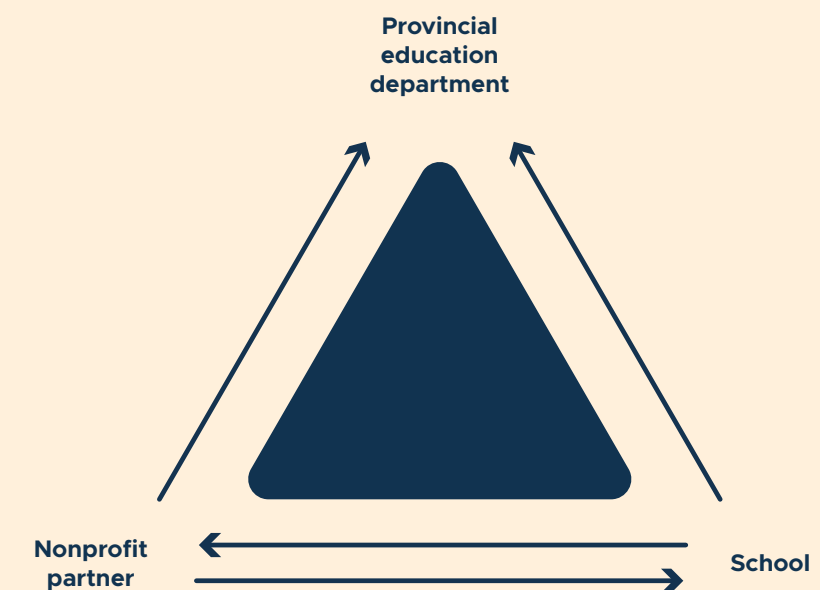
Accountability

The core accountability relationships in a public school partnership are between the provincial education department, the school, and the nonprofit partner.

For any institution to function effectively, there needs to be accountability. Increasing accountability at the school level is a key lever for increasing school functionality and learner outcomes. Experience has shown that in a South African context, we have been poor at combining accountability and support.³⁶

What makes Partnership Schools unique is that there are additional accountability mechanisms, with mutual accountability for all partners. The graphic below illustrates how these relationships work, with the provincial education department maintaining oversight as in all ordinary public schools. We'll explain each accountability relationship in more detail following the graphic, as well as the systems that enable these relationships to function well.

The provincial education department has oversight over both the nonprofit and school, while the school and its partner must also hold each other accountable.



³⁶Christie, P. (2022). Introduction to the Zenex Foundation series on learning backlogs. In P. Christie (Ed.), *Perspectives on learning backlogs in South African schooling* (pp. 2–11). Zenex Foundation; Schirmer, S., & Visser, R. (2023). *What's wrong with our education system?* The Centre for Development and Enterprise.

Enhanced principal accountability

The SIP, developed in collaboration with the nonprofit partner, is a critical management accountability tool that outlines school improvement commitments. The school owns and monitors its annual SIP, and the nonprofit partner works alongside school management to carry out the SIP goals.

To improve learner outcomes, every teacher needs to be accountable for delivering their best performance. As part of this, the principal needs to hold school staff accountable to the goals set in the SIP, and the SGB should hold the principal accountable for overall school outcomes.

A designated nonprofit staff member works closely with the SMT and circuit manager as part of helping the school monitor its SIP goals. The nonprofit partner and principal are accountable to each other and the department for carrying out the SIP. The nonprofit partner helps the principal monitor SIP objectives through a formal review meeting at the end of each term, scheduled weekly check-in meetings, and ad hoc virtual check-ins. Lines of communication between the nonprofit partner and principal should always be open to resolve issues as they come up.

As a co-opted SGB member, the nonprofit partner does not formally line manage the principal. The NPO functions as an implementing partner for the government; it “borrows” authority from the circuit manager. Partnership Schools are about enhanced accountability, which means both the school, represented by the principal, and the nonprofit partner need to be accountable to each other. If the nonprofit partner and principal are unable to find solutions together, they should consult the circuit manager, as the government has ultimate oversight.

School improvement planning and monitoring

SIPs are a national requirement. If used effectively, they can form the cornerstone of how a partner supports and monitors a school’s improvement. SIPs identify the most important annual priorities that the school wants to focus on. These are usually informed by the nine focus areas of the DBE’s School Self-Evaluation:

- 1 Basic school functionality
- 2 Leadership, management, and communication
- 3 Governance and relationships

- 4 Quality of teaching and learning, and educator development
- 5 Curriculum provision and resources
- 6 Learner achievement
- 7 School safety, security, and discipline
- 8 School infrastructure
- 9 Parents and community.³⁷

The DBE requires schools to have SIPs, but these are often only completed for compliance purposes. Many schools do not use the document to measure and monitor school improvement as they are supposed to. Nonprofit partners have used the SIP as a tool to identify the SMT’s priorities for school improvement and monitor progress during the year. The SIP is a key tool, because it outlines the main priorities and creates focus points for the partnership to work on.

It can be difficult to identify priorities, as there are usually many issues that need fixing. Using the School Self-Evaluation, the nonprofit partner should work with the school community to identify the three to five changes that are most likely to improve teaching and learning. The parties should then detail what actions are needed to achieve these changes. Nonprofit partners monitor SIP implementation on a quarterly basis through meetings³⁸ with the principal, who leads the work outlined in the SIP.

The DBE and provincial departments of education provide various templates that contain a great amount of detail, and these are helpful to an extent. It is important to note that the nonprofit partner can modify these templates, provided they cover the required areas. This should only be done in consultation with district staff, who must ultimately sign off on each school’s SIP.

³⁷Visit: www.education.gov.za/Home/SchoolSelfEvaluationinstrumentandSchoolImpro.aspx

³⁸Formal sit-downs to review the SIP are held once a quarter, but there are also informal check-ins which happen on at least a monthly basis.

Curriculum management

Curriculum management is how school leadership ensures that teaching and learning remain the core business of schools. In any school system, there is a fine balance between teachers teaching at a pace that ensures the curriculum is completed each year and ensuring that learners have mastered the content being taught. In South Africa, this tension is worsened by the inequality in the schooling system that the curriculum must bridge. Partnership Schools have an opportunity to address these challenges using the enhanced accountability and flexibility that the model provides.

Axium thinks about curriculum management as the processes and strategies the SMT uses to ensure effective implementation of the curriculum. Curriculum management includes the pace, depth, and completeness of instructional delivery to achieve desired learning outcomes. It is broken into three components of delivery, monitoring, and flexibility:

- 1 School leaders must ensure that teachers deliver the content effectively.
- 2 SMTs track progress and adjust it through monitoring.
- 3 There is flexibility to accommodate the realities of classroom learning and the many disruptions that are a part of rural schooling.

Curriculum delivery

Curriculum delivery is primarily about teachers being in class, on time, and teaching. It is also about ensuring that teaching time is protected and used effectively.

Axium estimates that in rural schools, as much as 20–30% of academic time is lost through a combination of shortened school terms and disrupted school weeks. When teacher and learner absences and lateness are accounted for, alongside inefficient timetabling and transition routines, it becomes clear that school leaders and nonprofit partners must make time on task a primary concern. This is as much about helping schools solve very practical problems around issues like scholar and teacher transport as it is about promoting accountability.

Curriculum monitoring

In South Africa, government monitoring of curriculum coverage has increased in response to research showing that teachers do not always cover the official curriculum in the required timeframe, and to learners' weak results in international tests.³⁹ However, teachers are caught between knowing that some learners do not understand the work due to factors like learning barriers, and the need to maintain a certain pace to ensure they get through CAPS Curriculum every year. This is also why curriculum flexibility⁴⁰ is needed.

SMTs, and subject or phase heads in particular, are responsible for curriculum monitoring. Axium coaches work with these leaders to see that all teachers are progressing through the curriculum at a pace that ensures it will be completed. This is a form of supportive accountability. It should take into account the reality of where learners are, and encourage practical plans to trim or prioritise content in a way that still ensures every child has the best possible opportunity to succeed.

Part of the SMT's job is to monitor how much of the curriculum teachers are covering. Initially, instructional coaches from the nonprofit partner help the SMT track teachers' progress throughout the year. The parties check that teachers are in class on time, are teaching and covering the curriculum, and are helping educators develop catch-up plans if necessary.

³⁹Bertram, C. A., Mthiyane, C. C. N., & Naidoo, J. (2021). The tension between curriculum coverage and quality learning: The experiences of South African teachers. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 81, Article 102353. www.doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2021.102353

⁴⁰Curriculum flexibility refers to educators' abilities to adapt and adjust the curriculum to meet learners' needs and circumstances

Learner outcomes

The ultimate measure of success for any education initiative is whether learners can demonstrate gains in learner outcomes. This is an important component of the accountability framework, and is ultimately how both schools and nonprofit partners are measured. In South Africa, the National Senior Certificate (NSC) exams are the only national, standardised metric that we have to measure learner outcomes, but the results only come in after a learner has left school.

Real, sustained improvement needs to start long before the NSC exams, to ensure that:

- School dropout decreases, and more students complete matric (or an equivalent qualification).
- Learners in earlier grades are “on track” to achieve important milestones, such as reading for meaning by the age of 10. Axiom has implemented these “on track” measures through external assessments in Grades 3, 6, and 9.
- The leaders in the school facilitate leadership development, training, and coaching in a sustainable way.
- Learners go on to tertiary studies or meaningful work.

Axiom usually measures the following indicators to solve some of the challenges mentioned above:

- School attendance and throughput rate
- CSAs
- Number of learners that go into tertiary education.

The education council

In the Eastern Cape, education councils are made up of the nonprofit partner, the provincial education department, the local community, and the principals and SGB chairpersons from a local cluster of schools located close to each other.⁴¹ The council works as an additional layer of accountability and oversight.

⁴¹This can include traditional leaders, or individuals from the community with expertise and skills who volunteer to be on the council.

The education council has two broad objectives,⁴² which are to:

- 1 Serve as a regional coordinating, advisory, developmental, and accountability structure for schools, and
- 2 Demonstrate the benefits of centrally coordinated, enhanced school improvement planning for a community of schools that could help the education department formulate policies to drive school improvement for clusters of rural schools.

The council meets at least quarterly to report on school and nonprofit partner progress and discuss common challenges and solutions. To date, it has successfully used its power as a network⁴³ to ensure that schools and communities have the access and opportunities they need.

Ideally, an education council should be established once a nonprofit has partnered with two or more schools, because the principals and SGB chairpersons need to hold each other accountable. This means it makes sense to have a community of schools. As a mechanism for enhancing context-specific accountability, the education council works best with a cluster of schools that are located close to each other.

Practically, the parties practise accountability in three ways:

- 1 Principals and SGB chairpersons are required to come to the council each quarter with a report on their previous term’s academic performance and finances.
- 2 The council goes to schools on an annual basis to conduct planned campus or classroom observations known as school walks. These school walks are not just a means of enhancing peer accountability for the schools visited, but also a way for visitors to learn and take best practices back to their own schools.
- 3 When a school does not fulfil its school improvement and council obligations, such as not attending workshops or submitting reports in a timely manner, the council is required to investigate on behalf of the group of schools. It may send a delegation to the school to figure out how best to solve the challenges.

⁴²These objectives are taken from the Eastern Cape education councils’ constitutions. These are context specific, but if you would like an example or broad framework, contact mkhuseleli@publicschoolpartnerships.org

⁴³Vist: www.canva.com/design/DAFpZpBBIKs/gm8QvHI4ON0aN4B6mXJwTQ/view

Education councils have worked particularly well as an enhanced accountability vehicle in a rural Eastern Cape setting, where this type of forum, and accounting and reporting measures resonate. Organisations working in similar contexts should consider using this forum, as it seems to work effectively in a rural setting.

Flexibility

Flexibility is one of the three levers for change in the Public School Partnerships model. It is built into the framework of the MOU with the department, which grants permission for flexibility. Greater school-level flexibility is present to address specific curriculum needs, especially as these relate to learning gaps. This enables the nonprofit partner to do things slightly differently in terms of time, assessments, and curriculum implementation.

Teaching and learning time

Additional teaching and learning time is often necessary to address the needs of learners who face learning barriers, or for those who have fallen behind in the curriculum.

In most public schools, the timetable is very rigid, because all schools across the province use the same timetable. The flexibility that the nonprofit partner has, which is outlined in the MOU and SLA, allows it to move lessons around and include an extra hour in the day to focus on specific skills such as reading. Having extra time in the day also gives teachers more time to focus on their professional development.

When designing a flexible timetable, nonprofit partners need to think of issues that may be affected by a longer school day, such as staff and scholar transport and nutrition needs. Most schools' start and end times are restricted due to teachers' and learners' reliance on public transport. This means it is sometimes not possible to extend the school day, especially in winter when daylight hours are shorter. Creative scheduling⁴⁴ comes in under flexibility, because it allows the school to switch periods around to fit in extra lessons.

⁴⁴In Axiom's experience, creative scheduling involves running programmes during a school day, including when teaching and learning may be disrupted for a number of reasons, to ensure that teaching and learning time is not lost.

Schools and their partners can use software (such as Staffroom⁴⁵) or timetabling experts to help with timetable setup and flexibility. The circuit manager must sign off on the adjusted timetable as a representative of government.

Many high schools have established practices where learners come in to attend lessons on the weekends. However, this time is often not well used, and sometimes learners are not supervised. The role of the nonprofit partner is to help the SMT decide on the best use of this additional time.

Curriculum flexibility

Curriculum flexibility refers to educators' abilities to adapt and adjust the curriculum to meet learners' needs and circumstances. Many learners in South Africa are far behind the required grade level in literacy and numeracy. Schools need curriculum and scheduling flexibility to give these learners additional support, helping them reach grade level. This flexibility allows teachers to make catch-up plans, re-package curriculum content, and use different strategies to deliver the same material. It ultimately ensures that teachers cover the curriculum effectively, despite existing learning gaps and disruptions like protests or weather-related issues.

Nonprofit partners work with schools and the education department to determine the best time and methodology to catch learners up outside of the usual school schedule. The nonprofit partners' education programme will typically outline the type of catch-up programme chosen. For example, Axiom Education uses TaRL principles for foundation phase literacy and Grades 4, 5 and 6 maths catch-up programmes.

External assessments

Provincial education departments may have district-wide assessment requirements. In the Eastern Cape, Axiom has worked closely with the district so that Axiom's assessments are integrated into district practices and may eventually take the place of district-wide assessments. One of the assessments used is the CSA, while the others are run by Green Shoots⁴⁶ and JumpTrak.⁴⁷

The nonprofit partner can request additional flexibility from the district and school to use these assessments as the recognised school-based assessment, rather than duplicating additional assessments.

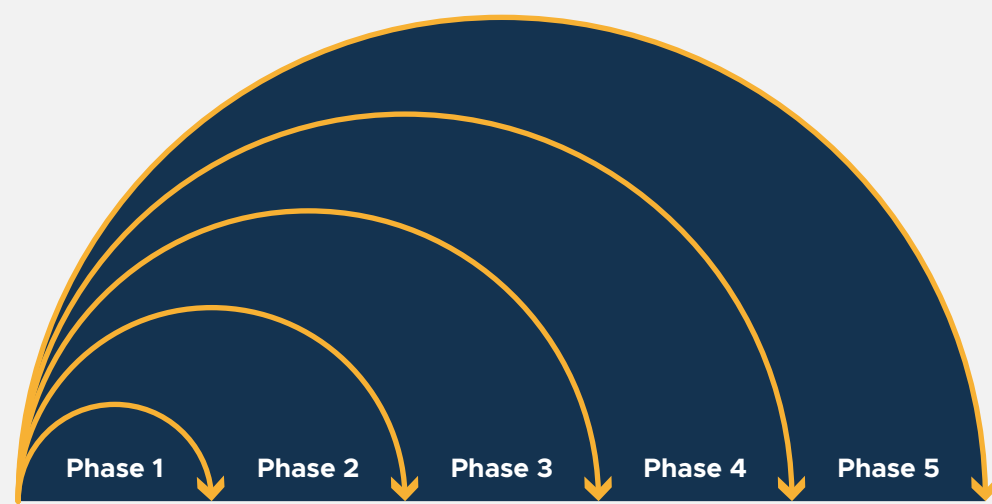
⁴⁵Visit: www.support.mystaffroom.net/creating-timetables

⁴⁶Visit: www.gsed.co.za

⁴⁷Visit: [/www.jumptrak.co.za](http://www.jumptrak.co.za)

Lessons from Axiom's phased approach⁴⁸ to school improvement

Axiom uses a phased approach to school improvement. This five-phased approach is outlined here as an example of how to address school improvement strategically. It offers inspiration for other nonprofit partners, but it should be adapted to each organisation and each school's specific needs and context.



The nonprofit partner should meet the school where they are. For a change to succeed, it must match the school's ability and receptiveness to change. Changes should not be made too early if the school is not ready for them. For example, if the timetable is disorganised and there are no teachers and leaders in the building, teacher coaching is unlikely to succeed. Eventually, if the school is able to progress to a self-governing state, many of the items introduced in earlier phases will no longer be necessary, because the school has less need for support.

Ideally, schools should only move to a new phase once the previous phase has been mastered. However, this is not always practical, and schools can still work on one or two elements from a different phase if needed. It is recommended that the school completes most aspects of each phase before moving to the next one.

Because it is impossible to do many things well at the same time, the organisation should focus on the work that has the greatest potential impact at each phase.

⁴⁸Note: While there is definitely a preferred order, each nonprofit partner's phases might look slightly different depending on the school, the nonprofit partner's theory of change, and the context.

Phase one: Partnerships, accountability structures, and planning

- Co-create partnership norms and values with the school community.
- Launch the partnership at a school. This requires minimal staff and a limited budget.⁴⁹ In Axiom's initial phase, only the designated nonprofit staff member with school leadership experience (as a principal or deputy principal) works with the principal, SMT, and SGB to get the school ready for the rest of the work. If necessary, other staff members with skills in particular areas, e.g., finance, will support them.
- Create or reinforce accountability structures between the principal, circuit manager, and nonprofit partner. This includes establishing any peer network accountability structures, like an education council.
- Support the principal in building a strong SIP that is a "living" document. Monitor the goals outlined in the SIP regularly, with all partners willing to be held accountable for their roles in school improvement.
- Train the SGB on how best to fulfil their governance mandate. This includes creating relevant school policies.

Phase two: Leadership, discipline, and culture

- Help the school build and establish a clearly defined school culture. This can include having:
 - A functional timetable,
 - A low level⁵⁰ of teacher and learner absenteeism through attendance monitoring,
 - Strong and orderly routines, and
 - Teachers in class teaching when they need to be.
- Train and coach school leadership to the point where:
 - The principal and their team begin to grow as instructional leaders.
 - The SMT is familiar with the SIP and is willing to be held accountable for their part in it.

⁴⁹An organisation's budget depends on a number of contextual factors, but a ballpark guideline for an annual partnership budget based on existing nonprofit partners' experiences is R2,000–R6,000 per learner.

⁵⁰This is relative and context dependent, but >95% attendance may be a good figure to begin from.

- The SMT sets an example for teachers, teachers set an example for learners, and there is mutual accountability for agreed standards.
- The growth in leadership and culture creates a school environment that is more conducive to learning in future phases of school improvement.

- The staffing and budget requirements are similar to phase one.

Phase three: Basic learning

- Strengthen basic learning through teacher professional development. School management, acting as instructional leaders, should ideally lead this. It should result in:
 - Teacher professional development sessions that are well attended, enthusiastically embraced, and that create demand for deeper follow-up in the form of coaching.
 - A consistent language of teaching practice, heard around the school and observed in classrooms.
- Community-based staff⁵¹ begin working at the school.
- Programmatic and staffing costs will increase, but this remains a relatively “low-cost” phase since no full-time instructional coaches are deployed to the school.
- Learners start to think about what happens after school, which leads to increased engagement in school through career guidance and tertiary education support.

Phase four: Deep learning

- The deep learning phase implies learning that affects teacher and leader practice.
- During this phase, Axiom aims to have one Axiom-employed instructional coach for every 15 teachers, and a school development manager who supports leadership and culture. Depending on the

size of the school, these human resources could be shared across multiple schools. The focus of instructional coaches is on leading change in practice through the school’s SMT, so that schools can own and drive change themselves.

- There may be additional hiring support. This could include hiring administration clerks, tutors for learning support programmes, and advisors for a career pathways programme. In Axiom’s experience, during this phase, there could be as many as 10-20 staff members working at a particular school, with the majority of these staff being community-based⁵² and on independently-sourced government stipends.

Signs that this deep work with teachers and leaders is succeeding:

- The school establishes and values a data-driven culture.
- High school dropout rates are reduced. The reduction should be relative to the school’s baseline, with annual dropout ideally reaching below 10%.
- Learners have opportunities for remediation or extension in core subjects. One example of this is attending a digital maths programme such as Green Shoots or Siyavula.
- Learner outcomes should improve within 6–18 months of the start of this phase.
- Instructional observation and feedback become established practices and are part of the school’s culture.
- The school may strengthen its partnerships with other institutions (e.g., police, Department of Social Development, or nonprofits focused on social work) to provide learners with psycho-social support.
- This phase requires substantial staffing and budget.

Phase five: Outward offering

- In this phase, schools have internalised the beliefs, knowledge, and practices developed during phase four, to the extent that they have an outward offering to share with other schools.

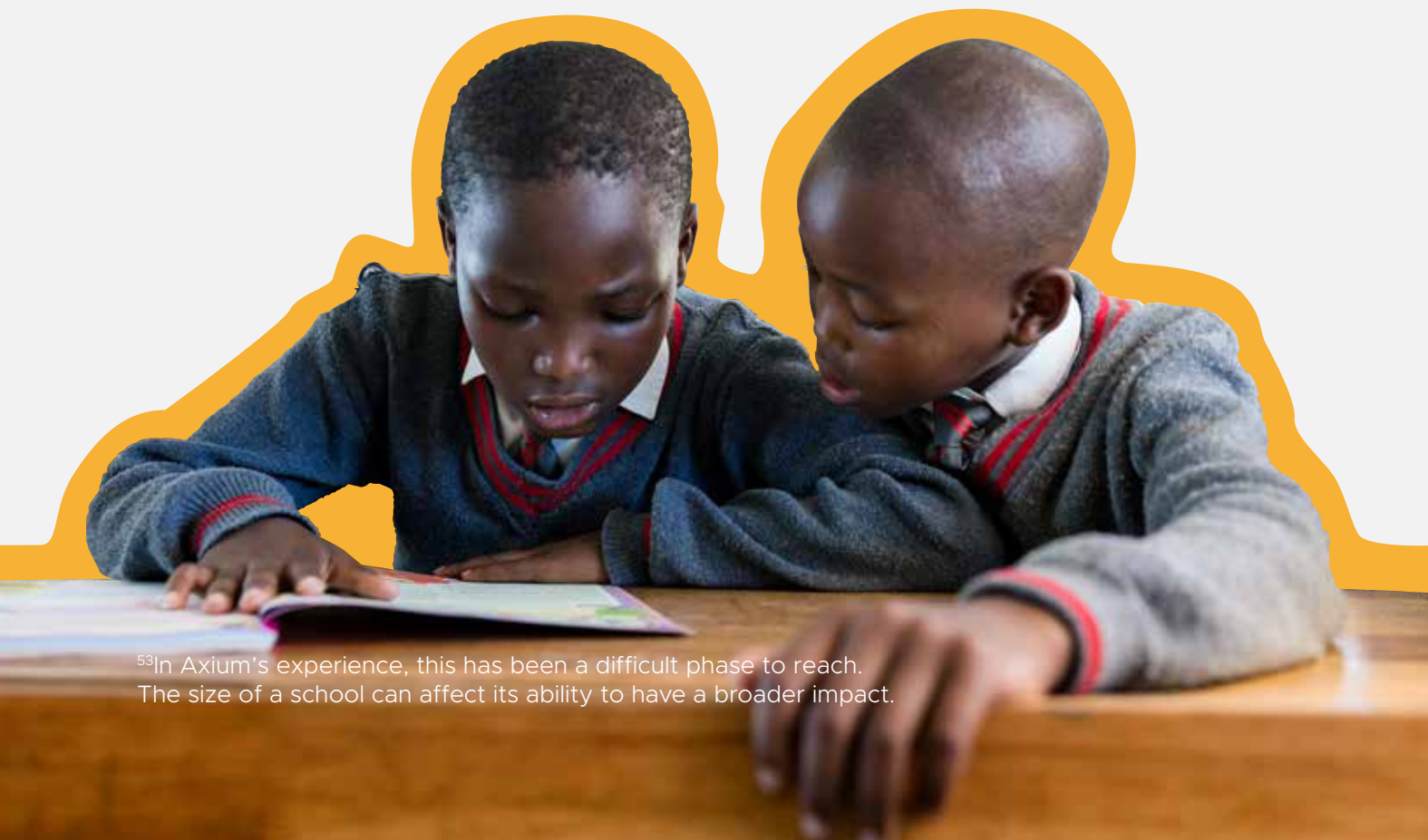
⁵¹Axiom’s theory of change includes the training and support of community-based staff (who are not qualified teachers) as literacy and numeracy instructors in rural classrooms. Not every nonprofit will have this programme.

⁵²In rural contexts, community-based staff have several advantages: Local employment, local knowledge, local role models, and easier access to schools compared with teachers who often travel from outside the community.

- Phase heads and lead teachers become coaches.
- District officials acknowledge the school as an example for other schools to visit and learn from.
- School leaders lead training and professional development sessions with other schools.
- The nonprofit partner's role shifts from supporting the development of processes to supporting established processes, thought partnership, and peer networks.
- Community-based staffing and programmatic work will continue with relatively low costs, but more expensive coaching and professional development costs will taper off.

Given the complexity of this work, only a handful of schools are likely to reach phase five,⁵³ but it can be a powerful catalyst for spreading the impact of the partnership model.

The example above is specific to Axiom's work and the context of the schools that it works with. Each nonprofit partner's phased approach to school improvement will look different. The important thing is that the approach is phased in a way that allows the school to absorb support over time.



⁵³In Axiom's experience, this has been a difficult phase to reach. The size of a school can affect its ability to have a broader impact.

Partnering with government effectively

Unblocking key issues

There are certain issues that neither a nonprofit partner nor a school can solve. In Axiom's (specifically rural) experience, there are seven particular areas that require support from the province and district to unblock:

- 1 Scholar transport
- 2 Vacancies at schools
- 3 School rationalisation
- 4 Textbook provision
- 5 Principal accountability
- 6 Disruptions to school
- 7 Infrastructure.

In these cases, the nonprofit partner should become an advocate for its schools, building on its good relationship with the provincial education department.

Many of these issues are complicated to resolve. Axiom has approached this by first trying to understand the way that government processes work. Then, it makes sure schools are doing what is required, such as submitting paperwork on time. Once the necessary requirements are fulfilled, Axiom tenaciously follows up with circuit managers and other officials.

A nonprofit partner can sometimes become a troubleshooting partner, understanding the challenges and constraints that government must work with, and helping identify solutions in a local context.

Trying to unblock issues while respecting the relationship with government can be a difficult line to tread. Respecting government hierarchy and ensuring that officials don't feel undermined is an important part of keeping relationships friendly. For example, do not approach an official at provincial level if you have not already approached someone at district level first.

Axium focuses on the shared values and vision outlined in the partnership agreement. When everyone involved is aligned on what the goals are, healthy relationships follow.



Conclusion: Building together for the future

School improvement is difficult, and there are many complex challenges. But there are also many interesting solutions to these challenges. Partnerships bring us together in community to face these challenges. They also enable us to merge our strengths and build a solid foundation from which to improve the lives and opportunities of our children.

Partnership Schools' success is a direct result of the effort and commitment of all involved: Schools, communities, governments, funders, and nonprofit partners. This is really where the magic happens. We know that it only takes one person who really believes in and supports a child to change their life. With partnerships, we're able to positively impact thousands of children.

Over the past nine years, we've seen schools make amazing progress through hard work. This document is a testament to the innovations that resulted from that incredible, sustained hard work. We know that the challenges we face in the Eastern Cape are similar to those facing other school communities in South Africa. We have seen from our colleagues in the Northern Cape and North West that this work can be replicated, and that having a guidebook helps accelerate school improvement.

When we think about the challenges and opportunities in education in South Africa, we are energised and inspired by the ways in which we've come together to build communities that generate innovative solutions.

We share those solutions with the hope that we can build additional relationships, communities, and innovations that make a difference for our children.



Mkhusele Ngcube,
Public School Partnerships
Eastern Cape Project Manager



Craig Paxton,
Axium Education
Executive Director

Reference list

Bambrick-Santoyo, P. (2018). *Leverage leadership 2.0: A practical guide to building exceptional schools*. Jossey-Bass. (31)

Barber, M., & Mourshed, M. (2007). *How the world's best-performing school systems come out on top*. McKinsey&Company.
<https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/education/our-insights/how-the-worlds-best-performing-school-systems-come-out-on-top> (29)

Bertram, C. A., Mthiyane, C. C. N., & Naidoo, J. (2021). The tension between curriculum coverage and quality learning: The experiences of South African teachers. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 81, Article 102353.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2021.102353> (41)

Bryk, A. S., & Schneider, B. (2002). *Trust in schools: A core resource for improvement*. Russell Sage Foundation. (13)

Bryk, A. S., Sebring, P. B., Allensworth, E., Easton, J. Q., & Luppescu, S. (2010). *Organizing schools for improvement: Lessons from Chicago*. University of Chicago Press. (32)

Christie, P. (2022). Introduction to the Zenex Foundation series on learning backlogs. In P. Christie (Ed.), *Perspectives on learning backlogs in South African schooling* (pp. 2–11). Zenex Foundation. (38)

City, E. A., Elmore, R. F., Fiarman, S. E., & Teitel, L. (2009). *Instructional rounds in education: A network approach to improving teaching and learning*. Harvard Education Press. (19)

Department of Basic Education. (2023). *PIRLS 2021: South African preliminary highlights report*. Department of Basic Education. (14)

Department of Basic Education. (2024). *South African 2023 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) highlights report*. (14)

Elmore, R. (2002). *Bridging the gap between standards and achievement: The imperative for professional development in education*. Albert Shanker Institute. (12)

Grant, C. M., Mills, V. L., Bouck, M., Davidson, E., Nelson, B. S., & Benson, S. (2009). *Secondary lenses on learning participant book: Team leadership for mathematics in middle and high schools*. SAGE. (12)

Hopkins, D., Harris, A., & Jackson, D. (1997). Understanding the school's capacity for development: Growth states and strategies. *School Leadership & Management*, 17(3), 401–412. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632439769944> (21)

Leithwood, K., Harris, A., & Hopkins, D. (2019). Seven strong claims about successful school leadership revisited. *School Leadership & Management*, 40(1), 5–22.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2019.1596077> (22, 24, 25, 26)

Paxton, C. (2015). *Possibilities and constraints for improvement in rural South African schools* [Doctoral thesis, University of Cape Town].
<https://nicspaull.files.wordpress.com/2016/01/paxton-possibilities-and-constraints-for-improvement-in-rural-south-african-schools-final-incl-corrections.pdf> (24)

Sanders, B., & Rivers, J. C. (1996). *Cumulative effects of teachers on future student academic performance*. University of Tennessee Value-Added Research and Assessment Center. (30)

Schirmer, S., & Visser, R. (2023). *What's wrong with our education system?* The Centre for Development and Enterprise. (38)

Short, P. M., & Greer, J. T. (1997). *Leadership in empowered schools: Themes from innovative efforts*. Merrill. (22)



publicschoolpartnerships.co.za

Produced by DGMT / Cape Town / August 2025



DGMT is a South African foundation built on endowments from Douglas George Murray and his wife, Eleanor. DGMT is committed to developing South Africa's potential through public innovation and strategic investment. Our goal for South Africa is a flourishing people, economy and society. Towards this end DGMT currently distributes about R160-million per year and leverages and manages a similar amount of funding through joint ventures with other investors.

1 Wodin Rd, Newlands, Cape Town, 7735. +27 (0)21 670 9840. www.dgmt.co.za