



Partnering for quality education:

A guide for school improvement





This manual highlights the school improvement work of the education nonprofits Apex Education, Axiom Education, Common Good, and Education Ally. It was compiled using organisational documents and interviews with programme staff. Their time and willingness to share their knowledge, experience, and insights into school improvement have made this work possible.

Table of contents

1 Preface

4 1 School improvement

4 1.1 Understanding school improvement

5 1.2 Nonprofit organisations supporting whole school improvement

5 1.2.1 Apex Education

5 1.2.2 Axiom Education

6 1.2.3 Common Good

6 1.2.4 Education Ally

7 1.3 Supporting school improvement

9 2 Creating the foundations for school improvement

9 2.1 Choosing a school improvement framework

10 2.1.1 The 5Essentials framework

12 2.1.2 Common Good’s phased framework

14 2.2 The importance of planning for a school’s improvement

16 2.2.1 Conducting a school self-evaluation (SSE)

20 2.2.2 SSEs inform school improvement plans (SIPs)

21 2.2.3 Effective SIP implementation

22 2.2.4 Planning for sustainability

23 2.3 Monitoring and evaluation

24 2.4 Instructional leadership

26 2.5 School culture

28 2.5.1 A school vision matters

28 2.5.2 Living the school values

29 2.5.3 A focus on high expectations

30 2.5.4 Evaluating school culture

30 2.6 Navigating change

32 3 Governance, management, and operations

32 3.1 Strengthening school governing body (SGB) governance

34 3.1.1 Formulating policies and codes of conduct

34 3.2 Management

35 3.2.1 Conducting school walks

37 3.2.2 Promoting distributed leadership

38 3.3 Operations

39 3.3.1 Human resources

39 3.3.1.1 Recruitment

42 3.3.1.2 Hiring additional staff

42 3.3.1.3 Performance management

43 3.3.2 Financial management

43 3.3.3 Professional development

44 3.3.4 Data management

46 4 Towards instructional change

47 4.1 Choosing an instructional approach

47 4.1.1 Planning for instructional change

48 4.2 Improving instructional practices

49 4.2.1 Data-driven instruction

50 4.2.2 Rigorous assessments

51 4.2.2.1 Common Schools Assessments

52 4.3 A productive teaching and learning environment

52 4.3.1 Purposeful, well-structured lessons

54 4.3.2 Clear and consistent routines

55 4.3.3 Adhering to the timetable

55 4.4 Digital learning

56 4.4.1 Apex Education’s blended learning model

59 4.4.2 Education Ally’s use of digital learning

61 5 Professional development

62 5.1 Strengthening instructional leadership

63 5.1.1 Developing instructional leaders

64 5.2 Conducting training

66 5.2.1 Training techniques: See it, Name it, Do it

67 5.2.2 Developing school management team (SMT) members as trainers

68 5.3 Instructional coaching

71 5.3.1 Initial planning and consultation

72 5.3.2 Conducting observations

72 5.3.3 Providing feedback

74 5.4 Supporting newly-appointed educators

75 6 Learner support

76 6.1 How to approach learner support

77 6.1.1 A framework for learner support

80 6.2 Strengthening academic support

80 6.2.1 Developing foundations for learning

81 6.2.2 Academic support for high school learners

81 6.2.3 Scheduling academic support

82

6.3 Providing psychosocial support

83

6.4 Providing career guidance

84

7 Conclusion

85

8 References

90

9 Further reading

90

9.1 School improvement frameworks

90

9.2 School improvement planning

91

9.3 School culture

92

9.4 Leadership

92

9.5 School management

93

9.6 Education and instructional change

93

9.7 Digital learning

94

9.8 Professional development



Glossary

Blended learning	Blended learning, also referred to as hybrid learning, combines face-to-face classroom teaching with digital learning.
Classroom observation	Classroom observations are structured visits where a partner or school management team (SMT) member watches educators deliver a lesson (or part of a lesson) to view teaching practices, learner engagement, and learning outcomes.
Department head	Department heads are members of the SMT. A department head may head up a specific learning phase, for example foundation phase, or an academic department that might include multiple subjects. Department heads manage curriculum delivery in their subject areas or phases.
Digital learning	Digital learning is the use of digital technologies to facilitate and enhance the process of teaching and learning.
Instructional coaching	Instructional coaching is a non-evaluative process where a coach, who is an experienced educator, works with educators to improve their instructional practices.
Instructional leadership	Instructional leadership is about orienting and structuring leadership practices to make teaching and learning the central focus of the school.

School culture	School culture is the environment on a school campus that, at its best, actively promotes teaching and learning. A school’s culture includes everything from the routines and rituals of daily life to the values and goals that define the learning environment.
School governance	School governance refers to the policies, structures, and processes that guide how a school operates and ensure that the staff and learners are accountable for their behaviour and performance.
School governing body (SGB)	The SGB is the body responsible for school governance. It is composed of parents, the principal, educators, non-teaching staff, and, in high schools, two learners who sit on the representative council of learners.
School leadership	School leadership refers to the school management team (SMT) and school governing body (SGB).
School management team (SMT)	The SMT is responsible for the day-to-day running of the school. It is made up of the principal, deputy principals and department heads.
School walk	A school walk is a structured visit to classrooms and school spaces to gather insights about teaching, learning, and the overall school environment. It helps identify patterns, celebrate successes, and inform school improvement efforts.

Acronyms

CAPS	Curriculum Assessment Policy Statements
CEMIS	Central Education Management Information System
CSA	Common Schools Assessments
DBE	Department of Basic Education
DBST	District-based support team
DDD	Data-driven districts
DDI	Data-driven instruction
ILI	Instructional Leadership Institute
PPN	Post-provisioning norms
QMS	Quality Management System
SA-SAMS	South African School Administration and Management System
SBST	School-based support team
SDM	School development manager
SEF	Social Employment Fund
SGB	School governing body
SIAS	Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support
SIP	School improvement plan
SMT	School management team
SSE	School self-evaluation
TaRL	Teaching at the Right Level

Preface

School improvement is a deliberate, sustained undertaking aimed at enhancing the quality of teaching and learning in a school. It requires the collective, coordinated efforts of school leadership, educators, learners, and parents towards a clear vision for a school’s future.

Successful school improvement is difficult in any context. To add to this difficulty, there is limited practical guidance on how to approach school improvement in South Africa.

This manual addresses this gap and is written for everyone committed to improving South African schools. Its primary focus is on practical ways to approach school improvement. To show how theory translates to practice, it draws extensively on accounts from four education nonprofits that have worked in school improvement in South Africa.

For the past ten years, Public School Partnerships has funded four education nonprofits dedicated to whole school improvement in schools in the Eastern Cape and Western Cape: Apex Education, Axiom Education, Common Good, and Education Ally. The partnerships are between a school, the provincial education department, and a nonprofit. They currently have two forms: Partnership Schools and Collaboration Schools¹.

This manual represents the learnings and innovations that have emerged out of these partnerships. It highlights school improvement work that has helped enhance teaching and learning in no-fee, non-selective schools². It is written for nonprofits, education practitioners, educators, and community leaders interested in school improvement work. The practices and guidelines in this manual can also be used by school leaders and education district officials.

Nonprofits and schools have reached a depth in partnership using the public school partnerships model that may not be possible outside of it. Despite this, you can still use this manual for school improvement outside of public school partnerships. School improvement is important, necessary, and difficult work in whatever form partnerships take. This manual aims to provide a foundation for that work.

¹For a detailed explanation of the Partnership Schools and Collaboration Schools model, see the infographic on the next page.

²Non-selective schools do not have any performance-based entrance requirements for learners.

Navigating this manual

School improvement is multi-faceted, and every school has different strengths and priority areas for improvement. As a result, there is no single starting point for school improvement. Many aspects of school improvement are also interconnected and cannot be separated.

Changes in one area of a school’s functioning will lead to changes in other areas. For example, improvements in school culture lead to a more respectful classroom environment, which enables educators to teach more effectively and improve lesson delivery.

For this reason, there are cross-references to sections throughout the manual, with page numbers provided in the footnotes.

The body of the manual is organised into five sections:

- 1 The foundations for school improvement
- 2 Governance, management, and operations
- 3 Instructional change
- 4 Professional development
- 5 Learner support

It is best read chronologically. However, each section can stand alone. Readers can refer to specific sections as required.

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 offerings that includes education programmes, HR and finance skills, and teacher coaching.

The school community, government and the partner can 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.



1 School improvement

1.1 Understanding school improvement

School improvement is the deliberate, ongoing process of enhancing teaching and learning in a school. Successful school improvement requires careful planning, a clear vision for the school's future, and a collective commitment to this vision. School improvement depends on school leadership (the SGB and SMT) driving this process.

Leaders who pursue school improvement are always striving to create a more productive teaching and learning environment. They consider what is happening in a school (both in and outside of the classroom) and identify ways to build on successes and address challenges. They are visible, open to new ways of thinking, and welcome interaction with staff, parents, and learners. Through their actions, they create an environment where change is possible. However, sustained improvement is a shared responsibility, and educators, learners, parents, and education district officials are all crucial in enabling school improvement.

Sustained school improvement depends on integrating changes into daily school life. Initiatives such as new policies, more intensive professional development, and adaptations to instructional approaches can bring visible change quickly. The challenge is ensuring that positive changes last. This means strengthening the whole school system and having a clear plan for maintaining improvement³. It requires a structured approach that addresses a school's short and long-term needs, considering practical steps that will make an immediate difference and positively impact learning in years to come. Comprehensive school improvement focuses on strengthening leadership, governance, instructional practices, school culture, and learner support to build instructional capacity.

Instructional capacity is a school's ability to support high-quality teaching and learning. When schools build strong instructional capacity, they can sustain and improve their practices. While schools can and should pursue school improvement independently, partnerships and external support can help with this improvement. In many South African schools, it is not a lack of commitment to school improvement that restricts high-quality teaching and learning. Rather, schools are restricted by resource and time constraints, and by leaders and educators not having access to the necessary support and professional development required to meet their responsibilities⁴.

³ Koh, G. A., Askill-Williams, H., & Barr, S. (2023). Sustaining school improvement initiatives: Advice from educational leaders. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 34(3), 298–330.

⁴ Schirmer, S., & Visser, R. (2023). *The silent crisis: Time to fix South Africa's schools*. The Centre for Development and Enterprise.

1.2 Nonprofit organisations supporting whole school improvement

The work that nonprofits are doing in school improvement in South Africa is relatively new. There is global research and reporting on school improvement, but little such research in South Africa. While there is much to be learnt from this global work, nonprofits in South Africa are operating in different contexts. They are making decisions based on what they think best supports school improvement by considering what has worked elsewhere and how they can adapt it to their context. This requires innovative thinking, ongoing reflection, and an openness to learning and improvement.

This manual showcases the work of four nonprofits that have partnered with no-fee, non-selective schools to support school improvement. Their willingness to share their successes and challenges in these partnerships over the past ten years has made this manual possible. They have provided invaluable insights that can help other education nonprofits and schools interested in undertaking school improvement.

The four nonprofit partners are introduced here briefly.

1.2.1 Apex Education

Apex Education aims to provide excellence in education to children from low-income communities and show that this can be done in South Africa. The organisation supports Apex High School in Eersteriver in Cape Town, and aims to achieve learner outcomes equal to the top-performing fee-paying schools in the Western Cape at a much lower cost.

Apex Education has supported Apex High School Eersteriver since its establishment in 2018⁵.

1.2.2 Axiom Education

"If we create proof points of what is possible for rural schools and learners when enabling conditions are in place... while advocating for these conditions with key decision-makers... then a clear pathway to success will become apparent and possible for rural students and schools." — Axiom's theory of change

Axiom Education works to raise student achievement in rural South African communities so that every rural learner leaves school with purpose, agency, and options. The organisation supports 13 schools in two districts in the rural Eastern Cape through the Partnership Schools model⁶.

⁵ [Apex Education](#); email: sanrie@apex-schools.org

⁶ [Axiom Education](#); email: info@axiomeducation.org

1.2.3 Common Good

“We directly support leaders to act with increasing effectiveness on the instructional practice in their schools. We develop principals, deputies, department heads, and subject leaders, and assist with creating an enabling environment oriented towards ongoing instructional improvement.”

— Common Good’s theory of change

Common Good partners with eight schools in Cape Town, the Northern Cape, and the North West using public school partnership models.

The organisation aims to develop the people who plan and implement the strategies needed for high-quality teaching to take place. By increasing the ability of school leadership to account for and shape school-wide instructional practice, Common Good supports improved teaching and learning and, as a result, improved academic results⁷.

1.2.4 Education Ally

“By focusing on strong school leadership, capable and empowered teachers, and targeted learner interventions, we are working towards building a network of high-performing no-fee public schools that consistently improve learner outcomes. Our goal is to deliver progressively higher-quality education, ensuring that our schools not only meet provincial benchmarks but set a new standard for excellence.”

— Education Ally’s theory of change

Education Ally was established in 2021 and partners with government, school leaders, and parents to improve whole school functionality by strengthening leadership, embedding effective governance, and building a culture of high performance.

Education Ally currently partners with two schools in Cape Town, where they work to drive systemic improvement, close learning gaps, and create schools that communities are proud to call their own⁸.

A note on language

The best practices in this manual are based on work done within public school partnership models. However, when referring to “partners” or “partnering” with schools in this document, we do not mean doing so within a public school partnership model unless otherwise stated.

⁷ Common Good; email: murray.gibbon@commongood.org.za

⁸ Education Ally; email: khaya@education-ally.org

1.3 Supporting school improvement

The school principal, with the support of their SMT and SGB, holds primary responsibility for leading school improvement. As a partner supporting a school’s improvement, your role is to help the principal and leadership team strengthen instructional capacity and build an environment where quality teaching and learning take place.

Before a school’s leadership team can decide whether to work with you, they must be clear in their understanding of why you are interested in partnering with them for school improvement and what you believe you can help the school achieve. This requires in-depth consultation and an openness to listening to all parties⁹. When you first consider partnering with a school, communicate why you want to support school improvement and how you believe you can contribute to it. This should be expressed in your theory of change.

A theory of change is the strategic thinking that defines an organisation’s work. It describes the challenge you wish to tackle, the activities you will offer, and how these activities are expected to lead to outcomes¹⁰. It should be rooted in your organisational strengths and capacity. It should also be based on an accurate assessment of how the challenge presents itself in the specific situations you propose to work.



“Our theory of change sharpens our focus on what we actually commit ourselves to working on and the outcomes for which we should be held accountable.”

— Matthew Draper, Head of Instruction, Common Good

When you share your theory of change with a school and expand on your offering, this lets the leadership team see how you understand school improvement and what support you can offer. If this links with the school’s vision for improvement and provides the support the school is looking for, you can then work together.

From the start, the roles and responsibilities of the school and the individuals or organisations supporting the school must be clear, as this will guide how you work together. Your initial support may be intensive, depending on the school context. However, the objective is to work towards independent practice where a strong leadership team, under the guidance of the principal, drives ongoing school improvement that lasts beyond your involvement.

⁹ Axiom’s manual [Public School Partnerships: A guide to supporting & improving schools](#) provides a comprehensive overview of the steps involved in establishing and formalising a partnership.

¹⁰ See DGMT. (2023). [A guide to monitoring and evaluation for NGOs](#) for further guidance on developing a theory of change.

The most effective collaborations are those where schools retain decision-making authority while partners provide expertise, resources, and coaching. Partners that take over planning, assume all responsibility for running a school, and undermine the knowledge held by the school can inadvertently weaken what the school is able to achieve. If you want to positively support school improvement, you need to:

- 1 Value collaborative relationships that are founded on trust and respect.
- 2 Appreciate that each school context is unique and has different strengths and priorities.
- 3 Respect the authority and knowledge of principals, SMTs, educators, and SGBs.
- 4 Be realistic in expectations of schools and make sure schools have the resources to meet expectations.
- 5 Work within the existing education system requirements and avoid unnecessary complexity and duplication.



2 Creating the foundations for school improvement

Successful school improvement partnerships are shaped by thoughtful collaboration between a school and a partner that is grounded in trust, shared purpose, and respectful engagement. Creating this foundation can take many months, even years, and cannot be rushed¹¹. If you are starting or considering a partnership with a school, Axiom Education’s guide to supporting and improving schools¹² offers detailed information on the initial stages of a public school partnership.

Once you have a partnership in place, focus on how you will support the school’s improvement. This chapter focuses on five core aspects of school improvement work:

- 1 Choosing a school improvement framework
- 2 The importance of planning with schools
- 3 Monitoring and evaluation
- 4 Instructional leadership
- 5 Building a positive school culture.

2.1 Choosing a school improvement framework

School improvement is an ongoing process that requires consistent effort and time. When planning how you approach school improvement, consider the impact that decisions will have from the moment of implementation to years in the future. Rushing into changes can place unnecessary burdens on a school and act against its best interests.

A carefully chosen school improvement framework that structures decision-making for sustained, schoolwide improvement and provides a shared way of approaching change offers a strong foundation for planning.

A school improvement framework is a structured model that guides how you plan, implement, and monitor school improvement activities. It provides a coherent set of principles or processes that help with setting priorities and working systematically towards sustainable, measurable school improvement.

¹¹For an example of this stage a partnership, DGMT has produced a [learning brief](#) reporting on the establishment of Partnership Schools in the Northern Cape. www.dgmt.co.za

¹² Axiom Education. (2025). *Public School Partnerships: A guide to supporting & improving schools*. DGMT.

There are two options when deciding on a framework for approaching school improvement:

- 1 The first is to use an existing framework for school improvement. This can be used as is or adjusted to a specific context.
- 2 The second option is to identify priority areas and put together a clear strategy for how to approach school improvement.

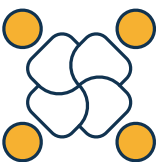
Whatever choice you make, planning needs to be contextually relevant to the South African education system. Any new programme or framework should fit within the public education system and the Department of Basic Education’s (DBE) requirements; otherwise, it will place unnecessary pressure on schools. It is advisable to consult relevant literature and review existing frameworks¹³ before deciding on a specific approach. A school improvement framework¹⁴ should be responsive and tailored to a school’s needs.

2.1.1 The 5Essentials framework

Axiom uses the 5Essentials framework¹⁵, which centres on:



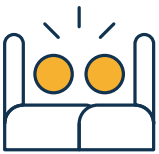
1 Effective leaders:
The principal works with educators to implement a clear and strategic vision for school success.



2 Collaborative teachers:
The staff is committed to the school, receives strong professional development, and works together to improve the school.



3 Ambitious teaching:
Classes are academically demanding and engage learners by emphasising the application of knowledge.



4 Supportive environment:
The school is safe and orderly. Educators have high expectations of learners. Learners are supported by their educators and peers.



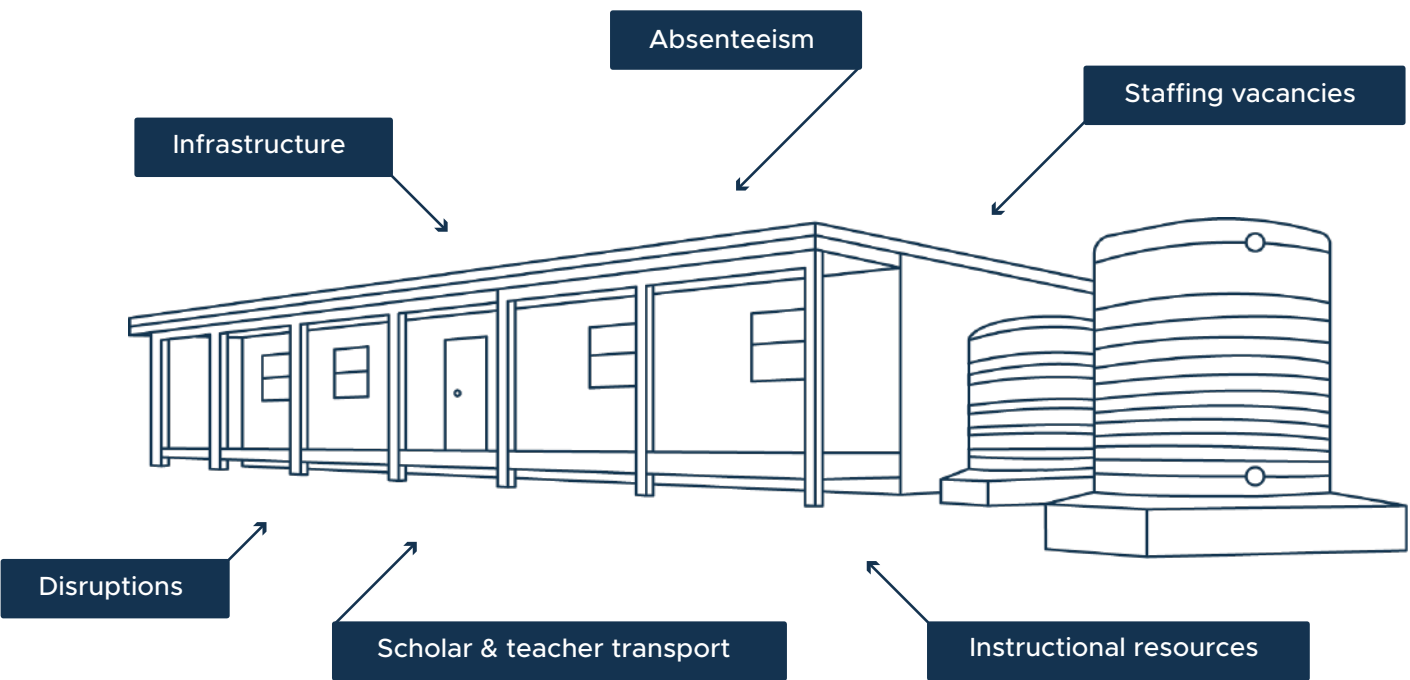
5 Involved families and communities:
The entire school staff builds strong relationships with families and communities to support learning.

¹³ See page number 91 for further readings on school improvement frameworks.
¹⁴ Examples of existing frameworks include [The six pillars of Ark schools](#) and [Four domains for rapid school improvement](#).
¹⁵ www.uchicagoimpact.org

Axiom has adapted the 5Essentials framework, originally developed for urban schools in the US, to the 5Essential Supports, a version suited to rural schools in the Eastern Cape. The following framework shows Axiom’s focus areas, the individuals or groups they anticipate working with, and what is necessary to achieve the maximum impact across all five pillars of support.

Axiom Education’s 5Essential Supports framework adapted for rural Eastern Cape schools

Rural school constraints



The work

				Impact
Circuit managers and Eastern Cape Department of Education	Leading through SMTs	Staff and school culture	Planning and monitoring	Effective leaders
Observation and feedback	Professional development			Collaborative teachers
Data-driven culture	Curriculum and resources	Assessments	Additional programming	Ambitious teaching
Student culture and learner leadership	Resources and infrastructure	Future orientation (pathways)	Psychosocial support	Supportive environment
Community-based staff and clubs	Parent development and community buy-in	School governing bodies		Involved families

2.1.2 Common Good’s phased framework

Common Good has developed a phased framework for school improvement that outlines its approach to and understanding of school improvement. The organisation decided to use a few international frameworks and theories¹⁶, and adapted the principles for South African contexts. This is an example of how international research and best practices can be adapted for South African contexts and DBE requirements.

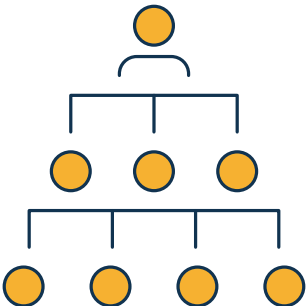
Common Good has developed its framework as a way of representing what school improvement should achieve, as well as the process of achieving it. It lays out the different areas towards which improvement efforts are directed. It then details a) further categories within these areas and b) the elements of practice within those categories¹⁷. The arrangement of practices goes from what is foundational to what is most sophisticated.



¹⁶ Examples of these include Bambrick-Santoyo, P. (2016). *Get better faster: A 90-day plan for developing new teachers*. Jossey-Bass; Bambrick-Santoyo, P. (2018). *Leverage leadership 2.0: A practical guide to building exceptional schools*. Jossey-Bass; Lemov, D. (2015). *Teach like a champion 2.0: 62 techniques that put students on the path to college* (2nd ed.). Jossey-Bass.

¹⁷ Contact [Matthew Draper](#) for further information on the development of this framework and the elements of practice within individual categories.

Common Good’s phased framework for school improvement

Teaching and learning		
	Curriculum	Learners are taught what they need to master according to the curriculum.
	Assessment	Learners are assessed fairly according to what they have been taught.
	Delivery	Learners are consistently and skilfully engaged in learning.
Management		
	Culture	Leaders model and promote how staff should work together to ensure a strong learning environment.
	Instruction	Leaders give an ongoing account of instructional practice across all teaching staff and provide the professional development needed to achieve it.
	Operations	Leaders complete required operational work predictably and thoroughly, making the best use of staff time and energy.
Governance		
	Establishment	The SGB is properly constituted and has put in place what is required of it by the Schools Act of 1996.
	Function	The SGB supports the ongoing work of management, particularly with regard to school improvement.
	Parents	Parents are empowered to make decisions and interact with the school in ways that support their children's education.

Importantly, a framework is not a rubric for evaluation. It offers a means of coherently and transparently outlining what is meant by school improvement, and provides structure to improvement work. The SMT and SGB should use the framework to review their practices and identify developmental priorities from there. With these priorities in mind, the principal and partner can plan what support the partner can offer the school.

2.2 The importance of planning for a school’s improvement

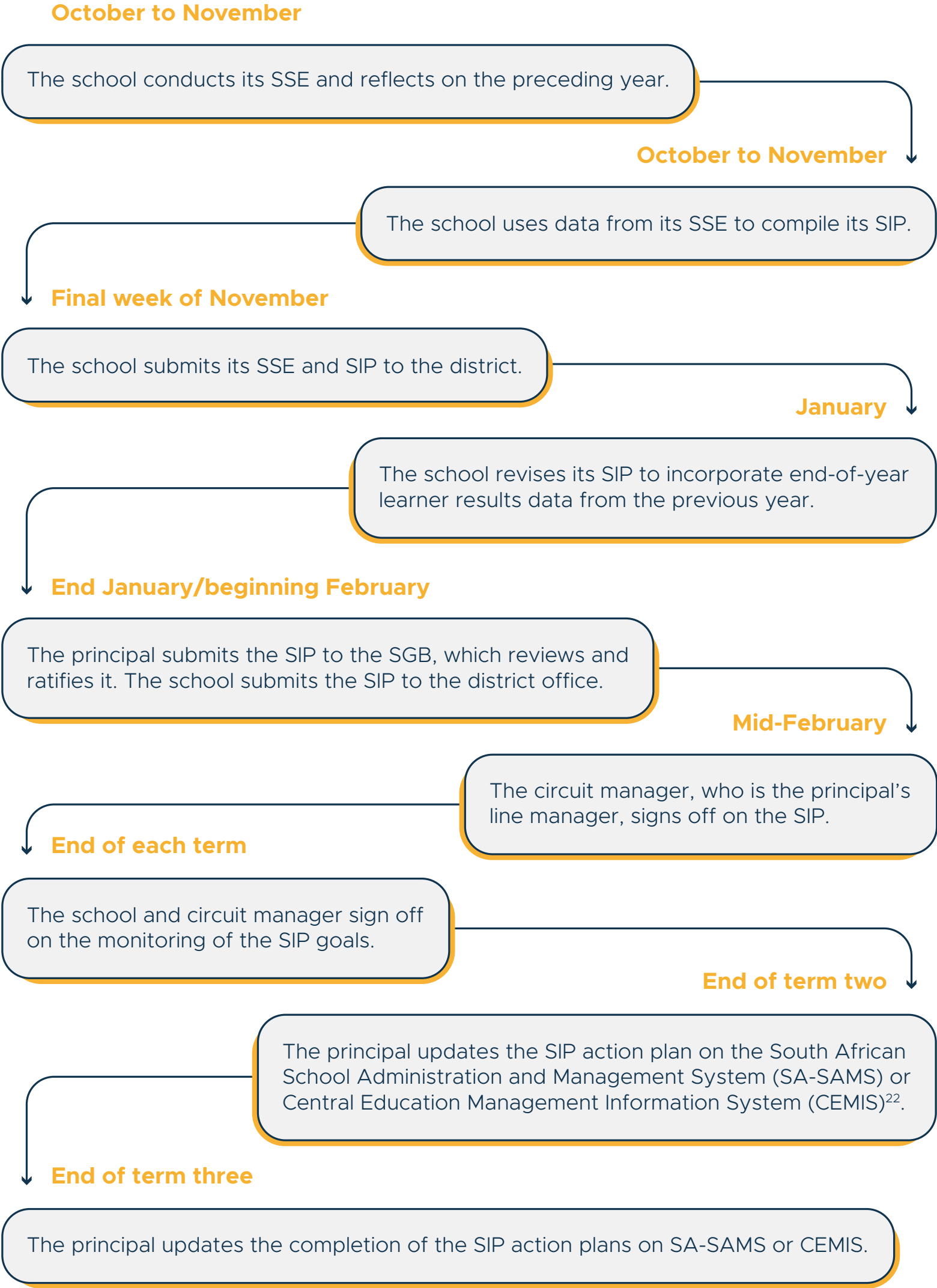
Before starting on improvement in a school, you should have a clear understanding of what works in the school, what needs to be improved, and which improvements are priorities. Conducting a school evaluation helps you plan for improvement and identify starting points. Skipping an evaluation or rushing into school improvement activities without careful planning can lead to implementing ideas that are theoretically sound, but not practical or appropriate to the school’s context.

There are many templates for conducting school evaluations and school improvement planning, and schools can use existing tools or develop their own¹⁸.

In the fourth term of every year, the DBE requires every South African public school to conduct a [school self-evaluation](#) (SSE)¹⁹ for the preceding year, and to compile a [school improvement plan](#) (SIP)²⁰ for the following year.

The DBE developed the SSE as a diagnostic tool to help schools assess their strengths and weaknesses across nine focus areas and reflect on their progress. Schools can then use their SSE to inform their SIP. A SIP is a planning document in which a school outlines its annual objectives for improved learner outcomes and details its plans for improving the school environment.

Conducting the SSE and formulating a SIP are departmental requirements. Collaboration Schools and Partnership Schools use these tools as foundations for evaluation and planning, rather than introducing additional tools or templates. The graphic below shows the time frames²¹ for developing, submitting, and monitoring the SSE and SIP.



¹⁸ For example, Australian Council for Educational Research. (2023). [School improvement tool](#).
Chapman, C., & Sammons, P. (2013). [School self-evaluation for school improvement: What works and why?](#) CfBT Education Trust.
Diesel, D. (2024). [How to create a school improvement plan](#).
¹⁹ An SSE template can be found here: [SSE template](#).
²⁰ A SIP template can be found here: [SIP template](#).
²¹ These time frames vary annually and between provinces. Refer to departmental circulars sent to schools and provincial departmental websites for accurate dates.

²² SA-SAMS (www.sasams.co.za) and CEMIS (www.cemis.westerncape.gov.za) are data management software. Western Cape schools use CEMIS and schools in all other provinces use SA-SAMS to manage administrative and curriculum data.

2.2.1 Conducting a school self-evaluation (SSE)

The SSE template contains nine sections:

- 1 Basic functionality
- 2 Quality of teaching, learning, and educator development
- 3 Learner achievement
- 4 Leadership, management, and communication
- 5 Curriculum provision and resources
- 6 Governance and relationships
- 7 School safety, security, and discipline
- 8 School infrastructure
- 9 Parents and community.



The DBE has designed the SSE to be used by schools and district officials²³. Each of the nine sections is broken down into further indicators, with rating scales for measuring the status of each indicator, as shown in the images below.

Extract from DBE’s school self-evaluation instrument

B. THE SSE INSTRUMENT			
1. BASIC FUNCTIONALITY (BF)			
PURPOSE to evaluate whether the school functions efficiently and effectively to realise its educational and social goals.			
1.1 RECORDS			
Document	Status	Comments / Reasons	Verification (For officials use)
a) Class Attendance Records	Available, with all aspects in order		Choose an item
b) Period Register	Not available		Choose an item
c) Late coming record (learners)	Available, with majority of the aspects in order		Choose an item
d) Truancy record	Available, but not in order		Choose an item
e) Educator time book/register	Available, with all aspects in order		Choose an item
f) Educator leave records	Available, with all aspects in order		Choose an item
g) Educator late coming & early departure register	Available, with all aspects in order		Choose an item
h) Post establishment	Choose an item		Choose an item
i) General School Policy	Choose an item		Choose an item
j) Year Plan	Available		Choose an item
k) Admission register	Not available		Choose an item

²³ For guidance on conducting the SSE see Department of Basic Education. (n.d. -a). [Guide to school self-evaluation](#).

1.2 CORE INDICATORS				
Criteria	Core Indicators	Response	Comments/ reasons	Verification (For officials use)
a) Learner attendance	i.) Percentage of Learners that were absent during the previous quarter.	Less than 3% (5)		Choose an item
b) Learner punctuality	ii.) Percentage of Learners that were late for school during the previous quarter.	3% - 5% (4)		Choose an item
c) Educator attendance	iii.) Percentage of educators that were absent during the previous quarter.	6% - 10% (3)		Choose an item
d) Educator punctuality & early departure	iv.) Percentage of educators that do not spend a minimum of 7 hours at school during the last 30 school days.	Greater than 15% (1)		Choose an item
e) Educator Leave Control Measures	v.) Number of educator leave forms NOT submitted for leave taken during the previous calendar month.	Leave Forms Choose an item Choose an item Nil 1 - 3 More than 3		Choose an item

The principal, with the support of the SMT, is responsible for conducting the SSE. They should draw on the SGB and other staff expertise on the nine SSE sections to help them conduct the SSE. A school should complete its SSE while partners are available to offer input on ratings and which areas need the most development. Axiom’s Head of School Development and Coaching explains:

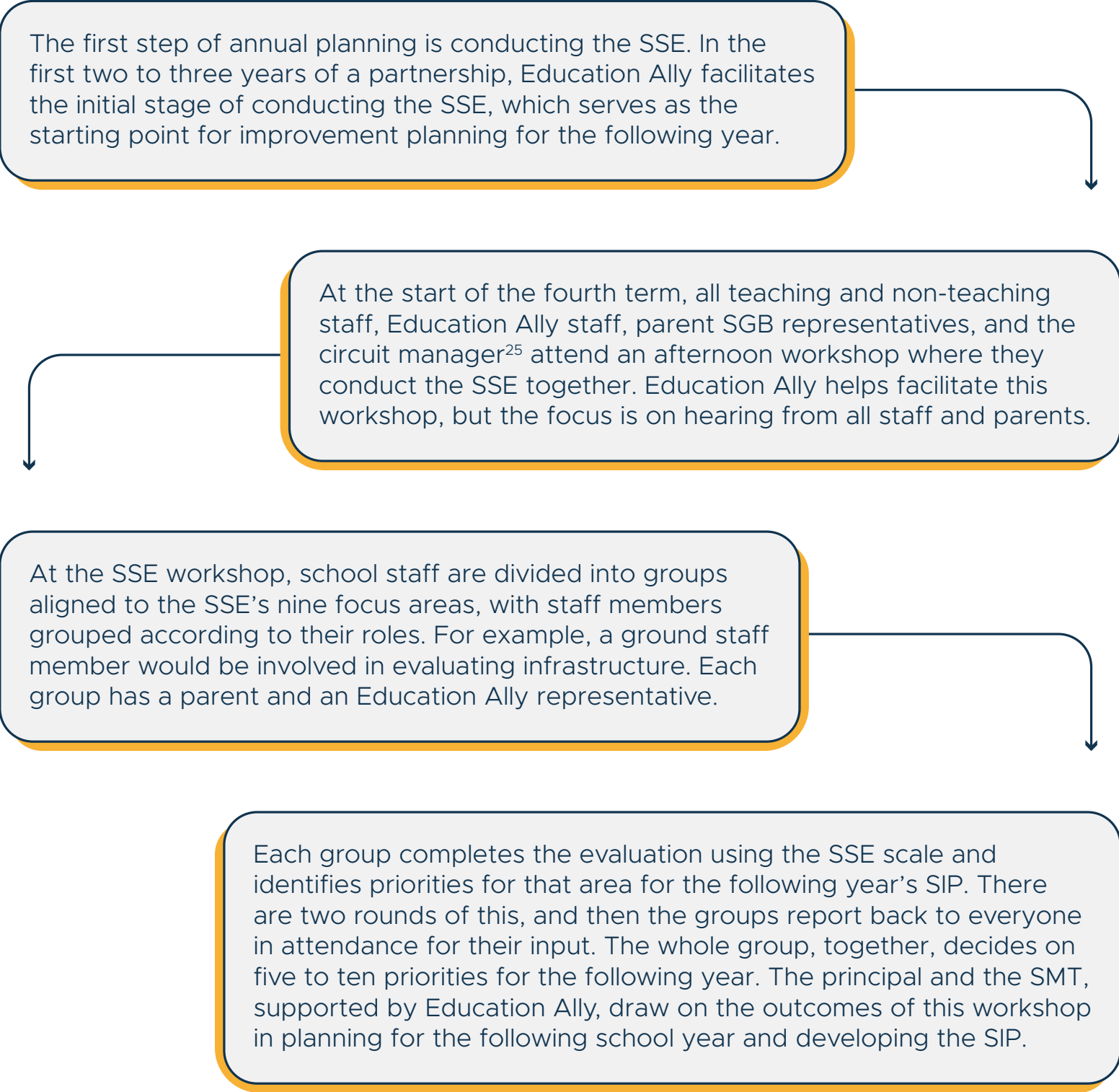


“Our SDMs [school development managers²⁴] support principals and SMTs [to plan]. The approach is to empower them, and not to create dependency, by showing them how to develop these documents, ensuring they retain the skill to continue planning sustainably even after the SDM's involvement has ended.”

— Jacob Chirumanzi, Axiom Education

²⁴ Axiom employs two school development managers who work in the Amathole East District and OR Tambo Inland districts respectively. SDMs are former principals with insight and experience of the realities of school management, teaching and learning.

Education Ally’s approach to working with a school to conduct the SSE is outlined here, showing how a school can involve all staff and the SGB in ways that contribute meaningfully to evaluation and planning.



This joint planning event is an important step in relationship building between the school and Education Ally staff and helps Education Ally gather data and insights into the school early in the partnership. The workshop’s impact is greater than compiling the SSE only. The involvement of so many voices helps clarify and communicate the school vision and priorities, and increases the school staff’s investment in the partnership.

²⁵ A circuit manager is the principal's line manager.

2.2.2 SSEs inform school improvement plans (SIPs)

The SSE informs planning for the following school year. Schools use SSE outcomes to develop their annual SIP. The SIP provides a single platform for schools to document and monitor their annual objectives for improved learner outcomes and school improvement²⁶. A SIP responds to findings from the SSE and the annual academic performance report²⁷.

A SIP consists of the same nine focus areas as the SSE, which are divided into Part A, “interventions that lead to improved learner performance”, and Part B, “interventions that improve the school environment”, as shown in the SIP templates below²⁸.

Extracts from the DBE's SIP template

3. AN OVERVIEW ON THE KEY AREAS PRIORITISED FOR IMPROVEMENT			
	No.	Focus area	Aspect targeted for improvement (State as objectives).
Part A: Interventions that lead to improved learner performance.	1.	BASIC FUNCTIONALITY	•
	2.	QUALITY OF TEACHING AND LEARNING AND EDUCATOR DEVELOPMENT	•
	3.	LEARNER ACHIEVEMENT	•
	4.	LEADERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, AND COMMUNICATION	•
	5.	CURRICULUM PROVISION AND RESOURCES	•
Part B: Interventions that improve the school environment.	6.	GOVERNANCE AND RELATIONSHIPS	•
	7.	SCHOOL SAFETY, SECURITY, AND DISCIPLINE	•
	8.	SCHOOL INFRASTRUCTURE	•
	9.	PARENTS AND COMMUNITY	•

²⁶ For further guidance on completing a SIP, see DBE (n.d. -b) [Development of school improvement plans](#).
²⁷ The annual academic performance report is a DBE requirement that provides a report on a school's academic performance.
²⁸ Adapted from [School improvement plan](#).

4. THE PLAN										
SECTION A: INTERVENTIONS THAT LEAD TO IMPROVED LEARNER PERFORMANCE										
NO.	FOCUS AREA	OBJECTIVE	DESCRIPTION OF ACTIVITIES	RESPONSIBILITY	START DATE	FINISH DATE	BUDGET (If any)	TERM	STATUS	COMMENTS /REASONS (To be completed at the end of each term)
1.								T1	Choose an item	
								T2	Choose an item	
								T3	Choose an item	
								T4	Choose an item	
								T1	Choose an item	
								T2	Choose an item	
								T3	Choose an item	
								T4	Choose an item	
								T1	Choose an item	
								T2	Choose an item	
								T3	Choose an item	
								T4	Choose an item	

Once the school has finalised its SSE, the principal compiles the SIP in the fourth term, with support from the SMT. In developing their SIP, the school specifies activities, timelines, and responsible parties to address the priority action areas from the SSE. Once the school has developed its SIP, it submits the plan to the district office for approval by the end of the fourth term.

The school submits quarterly reports on its SIP implementation to the district office, which the circuit manager reviews and signs off on. The principal also reports on SIP implementation to the SGB at quarterly meetings.

2.2.3 Effective SIP implementation

A well-formulated SIP transforms school operations by providing clear objectives and measurable goals. In the schools that Axiom and Common Good partner with, the SIP is a dynamic, living document that actively guides school leadership and planning.

For Axiom and Common Good, the SIP underpins the planning they do with schools and provides a foundation for each organisation’s support offerings for the following year. In the first few years of Axiom and Common Good’s partnerships, staff with education and leadership experience coach the principal and SMT to draft their SIPs. Gradually, schools take full responsibility for drafting, implementing, and monitoring their SIPs.

The principal and SMT are accountable to the district for implementing their SIP. A partner's role is to support the principal and school in developing skills that will help them achieve their SIP goals in the current and future years. While you may provide initial intensive support for SIP planning, implementation, and monitoring, helping the principal and SMT develop the skills they require to meet SIP objectives is much more powerful than direct implementation.

As a partner, your support should focus on imparting skills that strengthen school improvement, rather than carrying out activities yourself. For example, if a SIP priority is increased parental engagement, as a partner, you should not be establishing committees yourself or acting as the point of contact with parents. Your contribution should focus on how to support schools in successfully establishing any committee, selecting appropriate committee members, and creating spaces where meaningful engagement is possible. These are skills that the principal and staff can draw on in various contexts.

When a school has finalised its SIP, partners can plan with the school on how to support it in achieving SIP objectives. This should be clearly documented and referred to by all parties throughout the year.

2.2.4 Planning for sustainability

For anyone supporting a school, the goal should be to ensure that school staff have the necessary skills required to lead and sustain school improvement. Sustainability must be central to all aspects of your planning.

You should continuously ask the following questions during any decision-making and planning process:

- Are we promoting processes and developing tools that the school can take over and maintain, or will they require ongoing support?
- Are we equipping the principal and SMT to lead, or are we assuming their roles?
- Are tools aligned to DBE expectations, or are we creating parallel processes?
- Are we investing enough in training our own staff so that they can gradually and respectfully let go of supporting the school?

One of the most valuable planning tools is reflection. As a partner, you need to constantly reflect on what works, what doesn't, and how you can better support schools. To do this, you should:

- Monitor and evaluate your progress in meeting your commitments to schools.
- Be open to feedback and learning from schools.
- Keep up to date with school improvement research in South Africa and globally.
- Revise your theory of change and programme offering based on evidence and learning.

2.3 Monitoring and evaluation

Once you know what you are working towards, you can build a monitoring and evaluation system. Schools are responsible for monitoring the SIP priorities they have committed to. As a partner, you need to monitor and measure your activities and impact in supporting a school to see how your contribution supports its SIP implementation and its progress towards realising its vision.

Monitoring and evaluation should not be considered an add-on to school improvement work. It is essential for tracking progress, learning from challenges, building on successes, and ensuring that your work has a positive impact²⁹. An effective monitoring and evaluation system allows you to test your assumptions for what promotes school improvement and identify the impact of your activities. With these insights, you can refine and adapt your implementation strategy accordingly.

Monitoring and evaluation should be structured tightly around a few high-impact indicators that demonstrate that the right things are being worked on, and that your development support is producing the agreed-upon, desired change.

When you first partner with a school, it is easy to see multiple areas for improvement and want to start acting immediately. Taking time to reflect and plan for how you will monitor and evaluate progress can feel like you are delaying action. However, having a clear monitoring and evaluation plan in place should be a priority from the start of any school improvement efforts.

Planning for and implementing monitoring and evaluation has many important benefits:

- It ensures that your objectives and intended outcomes are carefully considered.
- With a clear monitoring and evaluation plan, there is a common understanding of what success looks like. This brings clarity to your work and prevents drifting away from the intended outcomes.
- If you are working without evidence of progress, you cannot know whether you are meeting the real needs of learners and educators.
- When you consistently monitor progress, you can identify challenges and gaps quickly and make the necessary adjustments.
- When you have evidence of what works and what doesn't, you can make informed decisions about implementing future work.
- It can help plan for school improvement in other schools. Sharing evaluations and what you have learnt with others is an impactful contribution to the education sector.

²⁹ DGMT has produced a guide to monitoring and evaluation: [A guide to monitoring and evaluation for NGOs](#)

2.4 Instructional leadership



“Instructional leadership is at the heart of why our school is successful. While many small things matter, this is the big lever. The only way to close the gap between previously advantaged and disadvantaged schools is through strong instructional leadership — leaders who coach, model, and drive excellence in teaching every single day.”

— Renate van der Westhuizen, founding principal, Apex High Eersteriver

Instructional leadership is about orienting and structuring leadership practice to place teaching and learning as the central focus of the school³⁰. Instructional leadership emphasises a consistent focus on academic improvement and creating a school environment that promotes effective teaching and learning and academic progress. In recent years, instructional leadership has gained increasing attention due to research consistently demonstrating that strong instructional leadership positively impacts learner achievement³¹.

From the beginning of a partnership with a school, Apex Education, Axiom, Common Good, and Education Ally place developing the principal and SMT as instructional leaders as central to their work³².

A strong instructional leader:

- Has a clear and compelling vision for the school that informs planning and decision-making towards school improvement.
- Communicates expectations clearly and respectfully, ensuring that all staff understand and support instructional goals.
- Collaborates with staff to develop realistic and attainable academic and instructional goals.
- Is data-driven and analyses learner outcomes to inform teaching and improve learner achievement.

- Observes teaching regularly and identifies opportunities for instructional coaching³³ and strengthening instructional practices.
- Leads ongoing professional development and coaching, ensuring that it is relevant, well-planned, and geared towards improving teaching quality.
- Holds themselves and their staff accountable for meeting instructional goals and strengthening learner outcomes.
- Cultivates a productive and supportive school culture focused on continuous improvement in teaching and learning.

Most schools have an SMT, and partners should support all SMT members in their development as instructional leaders. Small schools don’t always have an SMT. In these instances, the principal, with the support of a partner, should identify one or two experienced educators in the school who have strong instructional practices and leadership skills, and develop them as instructional leaders. This is vital for sustainability and ensuring that instructional leadership practices continue if the principal exits the school.

In South Africa, there is no mandated qualification or professional development for assuming principalship³⁴. Consequently, supporting principals in their role as instructional leaders and school managers³⁵ can be one of the most impactful ways that partners can contribute to school improvement.

2.5 School culture

School culture is the environment on a school campus that determines the quality of teaching and learning³⁶. A school’s culture encompasses everything from the routines of daily life to the values and goals that define the learning environment. Culture shapes every interaction and determines what behaviours are promoted and celebrated.

³⁰ A nonprofit’s contribution to strengthening instructional leadership is detailed further on page 24.

³¹ For a more comprehensive [overview](#) of instructional leadership, see Queensland Department of Education. (2022). [Instructional leadership—Leading the teaching and learning](#). Education Improvement Research Centre.

³² One of the core resources they have used is Bambrick-Santoyo, P. (2018). *Leverage leadership 2.0: A practical guide to building exceptional schools*. Jossey-Bass.

³³ Instructional coaching is a collaborative, non-evaluative process where a coach — who should be an experienced educator — collaborates with educators through observation, feedback, and goal-setting to improve instructional practices and ultimately enhance learner outcomes. Instructional coaching is discussed in depth on page 68.

³⁴ Naidoo, P. (2019). Perceptions of teachers and school management teams of the leadership roles of public school principals. [South African Journal of Education](#), 39(2), Article 1534.

³⁵ See page 34.

³⁶ For more detailed guidance on how to strengthen school culture consult Bennett, T. (2017). *Creating a culture: How school leaders can optimise behaviour*. Department for Education, UK; The Center on School Turnaround. (2018). [Shifting school culture to spark rapid improvement](#); The HEAD Foundation. (2021). [Fostering a positive school culture in the new normal](#).

In any environment, there will always be good days and bad days; culture is what you experience regularly and predictably. It is the energy throughout the school, classroom productivity, the way individuals communicate with and value each other, and the pride of belonging to the school community.

A positive school culture fosters a safe, respectful, and motivating environment where learning can thrive. Building a better school culture should be central to planning and prioritised throughout school improvement work.



“School culture is the critical thing in a school. If you don't get it right, nothing else is right. You can make no traction in any other area if the culture is not correct.”

— Dave de Korte, Education Programme Director, Common Good

There is a large body of research on school culture and the elements that make up a positive school culture³⁷. Across this research, there are variations as to what constitutes a school culture, but the following elements are widely accepted as crucial:

Shared vision and goals

When you know where you want to go and what you want to achieve, you can plan accordingly.

Shared values

Shared values determine what practices and behaviours are celebrated. When values and priorities are clear, a school can establish the necessary structures and systems to realise its vision.

Clear, high expectations

When everyone knows what is expected of them and the reasons for these expectations, you can hold individuals accountable for their behaviour.

Strong leadership

A school principal, who is supported by their SGB and SMT, sets the tone for all practices in the school. A principal and SMT who are strong instructional leaders³⁸ will guide a school towards meeting its vision.

An engaged school community

Positive engagement among all members of a school community fosters cohesion and motivates everyone to work together effectively. This includes educators working together, learners being actively engaged in learning, and engagement with parents and the surrounding community.

³⁷ See, for example Barth, R. (2013). *Culture in question*. In M. Grogan (Ed.), *The Jossey-Bass reader on educational leadership* (3rd ed., pp. 238–248). Jossey-Bass; Deal, T., & Peterson, K. (2016). *Shaping school culture* (3rd ed.). Jossey-Bass; Gruenert, S., & Whitaker, T. (2015). *School culture rewired: How to define, assess, and transform it*. ASCD.

³⁸ See page 62

Structured school routines

School routines are daily, structured practices such as morning registration, assemblies, lesson transitions, breaks, and dismissal. These routines promote order and predictability, ensuring that educators and learners are present and focused on effective teaching and learning³⁹.

A commitment to learning

Staff and learners constantly want to learn and do better. Learners are engaged in class and work to meet expectations. Staff enthusiastically share and embrace opportunities for professional development⁴⁰.

A commitment to celebrating achievements

Celebrating successes, whether big or small, promotes excellence and creates a motivating school environment. Celebrating achievements shows others what they can achieve and reinforces expectations of excellence.

Growing and maintaining a positive school culture requires intentional effort and must be embedded in daily practices across the school. While each educator brings their own teaching style and personality to their classroom, the underlying expectations, values, and behaviours should remain consistent throughout the school. Learners then know what is expected of them and the consequences for not meeting expectations. This consistency contributes to a more stable learning environment and enables learners to focus on what really matters: learning.



“The high point of a positive culture in the classroom is learner engagement, when learners are involved and engaged in learning.”

— Matthew Draper, Head of Instruction, Common Good

The first three elements — a school's vision, shared values, and high expectations — create a foundation for a school's culture and should guide how a school approaches improvement.

2.5.1 A school vision matters

A clear vision defines where a school wants to go, what it aims to achieve, and how it will get there. A unified vision guides the school community towards long-term goals.

When partnering with a school, a valuable first step is to work with the school to identify their vision, goals, and aspirations⁴¹. This process ensures a shared

³⁹ See page 54

⁴⁰ See page 61

⁴¹ For guidance on developing a school vision see Georgia Leadership Institute for School Improvement. (2014). *Shaping a vision of academic success for all students*; James, S. (2025). Vision and mission of school statements: A practical guide with examples. *Education Walkthrough*.

understanding of how a school wishes to develop. Axiom’s approach is described here as a practical example.

When Axiom partners with a new school, one of the first events is a workshop for all educators. This occurs before the school and Axiom have signed a formal partnership agreement. At this workshop, facilitated by one of Axiom’s staff members who has experience as a principal, the school staff reflects on what they want to achieve in the school’s future. Based on this, they develop a draft school vision and formulate a mission statement, which outlines what needs to happen to achieve this vision. School staff then identify a set of values that promote the behaviours needed to achieve the vision. After the workshop, the SMT shares the draft vision, mission statement, and values with the SGB and other staff for comment, after which a final version is agreed upon.

This process helps Axiom and the school align their vision for the school’s future. A clear vision serves as a guide for decision-making throughout school improvement. As part of planning, a school and its partner should always refer back to the school’s vision and consider how implementing new ideas or plans will help realise this vision.

2.5.2 Living the school values

Developing a vision, mission statement, and set of values is only a starting point. The principal should ensure that everyone in the school knows the school’s values and goals. Most importantly, staff and learners need to appreciate and prioritise maintaining the school’s values. These values shape the daily practices in the school and therefore affect the school’s culture.

Once a school has decided on its values, they should be visible and displayed throughout the school — such as in classrooms, passages, and communal areas — to continuously remind everyone of expected behaviours. These values should be communicated and spoken about consistently in events like assemblies and morning registration periods. Instilling values such as respect, honesty, and accountability contributes to a productive learning environment where hard work and commitment to education are celebrated.



“We instilled the values, and then the whole school changed. Because now the focus was on the values, and then the learners could easily grab and easily implement all the necessary routines and all the necessary discipline in classes and outside the classes. Having a school culture, having a disciplined institution, it makes teaching and learning flow.”

— Zanele Hene, deputy principal and head of culture, Silikamva High School

2.5.3 A focus on high expectations

High expectations and strong instructional support boost learner motivation and achievement. Educators should clearly communicate expectations and how learners can meet them. This clarity increases ownership of learning⁴². When learners meet expectations, educators should celebrate these achievements.



“At Apex, our expectations — of both scholars and teachers — are extremely high. We firmly believe that children rise to the level of the expectations set for them. If you expect excellence and provide the right support, they will meet — and often exceed — those expectations.”

— Renate van der Westhuizen, founding principal, Apex High Eersteriver

Similarly, staff expectations should be agreed upon as part of performance management and when developing annual, personalised training plans. When these expectations are in place, the SMT can see what is needed for staff to meet expectations and plan for professional development and support.

2.5.4 Evaluating school culture

Evaluating school culture is a complex task. The relationships between staff and learners, the respect that all members of a school community have for the school and learning, and the level of learners’ engagement all shape a school’s culture.

Examples of indicators that can be used to measure shifts in school culture include:

- School attendance and punctuality of both staff and learners
- Behavioural incidents
- Staff engagement and attendance at meetings.

A successful school culture is not built overnight — it is the result of continuous evaluation and improvement. Consistently consulting a school’s SIP and referring back to its vision can help evaluate progress and ensure that a school prioritises growing a positive culture.

⁴² Cox, S., & Zhou, J. (2019). [How high expectations and engagement in primary school drive student learning](#). Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation.

2.6 Navigating change

When you first start working towards improvement, the school community may be hesitant because change can seem intimidating and uncertain. Consultation and working *with* a school in planning for improvement can help address this uncertainty. When the school community knows what they want to change, you can then plan together for how to achieve this change. To help schools navigate change, the following practices can be useful:

- **Start with “why”:** You should be clear in your reasons for undertaking school improvement. The principal should communicate these reasons to all staff, learners, and parents. When a principal can clearly explain the reason for change and how it will lead to intended outcomes such as improved learner results, this can help reduce hesitancy.
- **Build trust first:** When there is an established relationship and a school community believes those initiating change are invested in the school’s success, they are more likely to respond positively to new practices and ways of thinking.
- **Create opportunities for small wins:** Set achievable early goals that demonstrate progress. Early success helps shift attitudes and builds momentum.
- **Provide support:** Any expectations must be accompanied by the support required to meet those expectations.
- **Use data to drive change:** When you have data that shows improvements in areas such as learner attendance, punctuality, and academic results, it demonstrates the impact of new practices. Encourage discussion around what data shows and use it as a tool for learning, not criticism.
- **Acknowledge effort and progress:** Improvement takes time and can happen slowly. Be mindful of constantly recognising effort and showing appreciation for improvement, however small. This helps maintain motivation during long-term change processes.



3 Governance, management, and operations

Well-functioning school governance, management, and operations create a stable environment that promotes productive teaching and engaged learning. Governance ensures that schools are guided by clear policies and accountability mechanisms. Management provides the leadership necessary to implement these policies and pursue school improvement. A strong operations team ensures that a school runs smoothly, allowing educators to focus on teaching.

The South African Schools Act⁴³ mandates that an SGB oversees public school governance. The SGB is responsible for strategic oversight, financial oversight, approving the code of conduct and school policies, and ensuring the efficient running of schools in line with national and provincial policies.

The principal, with the SMT's support, is responsible for school management; that is, the day-to-day running of a school, which includes overseeing administration and operations, and ensuring productive teaching and learning. The SGB, principal, and SMT form the school leadership body.

This chapter explores how you can strengthen governance, management, and operations while respecting existing leadership structures and departmental requirements.

3.1 Strengthening school governing body (SGB) governance

In ordinary public schools, the SGB typically includes parents, educators, non-teaching staff, and, in high schools, two learners who sit on the representative council of learners. The SGB chairperson must be a parent. The principal is an automatic (ex officio) member, while other members are elected or co-opted. An SGB can invite individuals to join as co-opted members. These people are generally co-opted for their expertise or as community representatives. Co-opted members attend meetings and play an advisory role, but they do not have voting rights.

SGBs meet quarterly. The Schools Act states that sub-committees such as finance, discipline, and hiring committees should meet regularly, but does not stipulate frequency. To maintain sound governance practices and oversight, schools should aim for monthly finance committee meetings, while other committees should meet at least quarterly. Committees can also meet on an ad hoc basis for matters such as managing a disciplinary procedure or hiring a new educator.

⁴³ Republic of South Africa. 1996. [South African Schools Act \(Act no. 84 of 1996\)](#).

A strong SGB contributes to creating an environment where teaching and learning can thrive. However, the role that SGBs play varies across schools. A major influence on an SGB's success is how members are prepared for their role. Parents who serve on SGBs may not have had much experience in formal governance structures, which makes training and development essential for SGBs to function effectively.



"They gave us all this information that I've never been introduced to before, but now I'm an experienced SGB member because of that. So they have empowered me a lot. In the meetings, you're given the chance to say what you want to say, every meeting of the SGB you feel like 'I'm part of this.' It really transformed me. Every year, we're changing, we're putting new things in the school, and I've seen that make a lot of change."

— Siyanda Mpofu, former Jupiter Primary SGB chairperson

District officials run training sessions for new SGB members. However, this training can be very theoretical, focused on departmental policy compliance rather than practical training relevant to a school's everyday functioning. It is also normally conducted at a single central location far from schools, which can make it difficult for SGB members to attend. When this is the case, supplement this training with more practical training at a venue that is accessible for SGB members.



This is the approach taken by Axiom, Common Good, and Education Ally, who host workshops locally and structure training topics according to the needs and requests of SGBs. Their training has focused on:

- Recruitment
- Financial literacy and reporting
- Meeting procedures
- Disciplinary procedures
- Fundraising
- The difference between governance and management.

3.1.1 Formulating policies and codes of conduct

The South African Schools Act requires that each school's SGB adopt a code of conduct outlining behavioural rules and disciplinary procedures. The SMT is responsible for developing a draft code of conduct that adheres to all national laws and relevant education policies. The school values should inform the code of conduct, which should be rooted in the school's broader vision for discipline, respect, and accountability⁴⁴.

When an SMT has drafted a code of conduct, it is shared with other staff and parents (and with learners in the case of high schools) for their feedback. Once the SMT has incorporated relevant feedback, the SGB reviews the draft, asks for revisions if necessary, and adopts the code of conduct. Learners sign a commitment to adhere to it when they are at school or representing the school at external events.

In addition to a school's code of conduct, every school is required to develop numerous school policies to support its operations. These include assessment policies⁴⁵, discipline policies, learner support policies, and inclusive education policies. It is up to individual schools to develop their policies⁴⁵. You can play a consultative role when schools are developing such policies, such as providing them with templates or examples to use as a starting point. The final decision on policies lies with the school's SGB.

SGBs are mandated to review the policies and code of conduct annually. This should not be viewed purely as a compliance issue. Examining and refining policies can promote more effective and functional learning environments. The SGB and SMT should review the code of conduct and policies consistently to ensure that they remain relevant to the school's context and values.

⁴⁴ Apex High Eersteriver's code of conduct is a good example of a code of conduct that clearly reflects the school's values and its expectations of learners www.apexhigh.co.za

⁴⁵ For up-to-date policy templates, contact anthony@publicschoolpartnerships.org

3.2 Management

The principal, with the support of their SMT, is responsible for managing a school on a day-to-day basis. This includes making sure school operations are well coordinated and run smoothly, staff are meeting responsibilities, and learners are in class and learning when they should be. A principal must fulfil this role while simultaneously acting as an instructional leader. This is a demanding role for any principal. In many South African schools, this role is made harder due to financial and human resource constraints, principals' heavy administrative load, and lack of access to relevant training for their role⁴⁶.

It is the school district, through the circuit manager, who manages a principal and holds them accountable for performance. District officials are responsible for multiple schools, meaning that school visits are often rushed, with limited opportunity for offering principals professional development or guidance.

Any work that aims to support the principal and SMT should prioritise supporting them in a way that responds to these constraints without undermining their authority and existing expertise. As a partner, make it clear, in your words and actions, that you are there to provide school management with coaching, mentoring, and resources that help them to grow as leaders and promote positive change. The goal should be to give the principal and SMT structured support to develop the skills required to sustain improvement independently.

At first, you can work alongside the SMT and coach them as they fulfil their management responsibilities, but gradually reduce input so that schools ultimately assume all responsibility for ongoing school improvement.

Approaches to supporting school management may vary, but the practices outlined here are central to successful support.

3.2.1 Conducting school walks

School walks are a valuable way for the SMT to observe school and classroom practices⁴⁷. School walks refer to a structured walk around a school to view practices inside and outside the classroom, to gather insights about teaching, learning, and the overall school environment.

As school walks are not common practice or departmental requirements, it will often be a partner working closely with the principal who introduces school walks. One of

⁴⁶ Moses, E. (2024). *Principal retention and attrition trends in South Africa: Insights from the PERSAL data*. Research on Socio-Economic Policy (RESEP).

⁴⁷ For more information on how to conduct school walks, contact matthew.draper@commongood.org.za

the partner's staff members who has expertise in leadership should initially accompany the principal and SMT on school walks to coach them in observation and feedback techniques. Once an SMT member has experience in school walks, they can then conduct the walks independently to keep up to date with school activities.

Typically, a school walk is planned with a purposeful set of objectives and questions in place. The principal and SMT should conduct school walks on a weekly basis, and beforehand they should decide together what questions they want to answer from the school walk. Afterwards, the principal or SMT member should reflect on their observations and answers immediately or, at the latest, within a day.

In planning and conducting a school walk:

- Communicate to all school staff that school walks are not to criticise, but to observe what is happening in the school.
- Formulate specific questions that are the focus of the school walk. Examples could be, "How is an educator translating professional development training in practice?" and, "Are learners transitioning quietly and promptly between classes?"
- Visit the relevant areas of the school with these questions in mind.
- Enter classes quietly, find a space to stand, and minimise disruptions to teaching and learning.
- Refer back to and respond to initial questions at the end of the walk.
- Identify areas of strength and areas needing improvement. The principal and SMT members use these to formulate a plan for improvement.

The success of school walks depends on the principal or SMT member sharing feedback with educators or non-teaching staff, ideally within a day of their observations. Feedback is only successful if it is delivered respectfully and includes how to respond to any challenges that are identified⁴⁸. This process of narrowing down what most needs to be given as feedback is crucial. Too much feedback or imprecise feedback is difficult to act on and can lead to expectations of change that are overwhelming or unachievable.

Because school observations are rare in many schools, educators may be hesitant to be observed. Apex Education, Axiom, Common Good, and Education Ally have found that, once a few educators realise the value of school walks as a developmental practice and respond positively to them, this attitude spreads to their colleagues, who become more receptive to being observed.

It can be challenging for principals and SMT members to conduct frequent school walks due to the extensive demands on their time. However, instructional leadership

depends on an SMT knowing what is happening in their school and being able to observe where they can support staff or learners. This is clear in Silikamva High's principal's reflections on how school walks have benefited her:



"I have a coach that comes in every week. We do school walks together, and then those school walks aim to help me see the challenges that maybe teachers are faced with in the classrooms, where we can support them."

— Siphathisiwe Nkala-Nohla, principal, Silikamva High

When principals view school walks as a valuable resource, their commitment to including school walks in their daily or weekly routines increases. If a school or partner has the financial resources to employ additional educators or teacher assistants, this can help open up space in the timetable for the principal and SMT to conduct school walks.

3.2.2 Promoting distributed leadership

Traditionally, in most South African schools, the principal is responsible for all major decisions. A distributed leadership model, where the principal, SMT, and other staff members share leadership responsibilities, can help support the principal and SMT in their roles as instructional leaders.

In a distributed leadership model, leadership is a collective practice with an emphasis on shared decision-making. The principal maintains overall responsibility for the school, but supports staff who take on leadership responsibilities that align with their expertise⁴⁹. Distributed leadership can help foster shared purpose and collective responsibility towards reaching specific outcomes. This creates an enabling environment for change and improvement.



"It's not just about the principal. The language of distributed leadership makes a lot of sense. There's more work than one person can handle. There's a set of skills required that you can't embody in one person."

— Matthew Draper, Head of Instruction, Common Good

Principals and SMTs identify educators who have exhibited leadership traits and decide how they can support these staff members to develop these strengths and take on leadership roles. Any partner staff supporting a principal and SMT in this process should have school leadership experience to do so successfully.

For distributed leadership to succeed, the principal must ensure that staff with leadership roles know what their responsibilities are. They must also ensure that these

⁴⁸ See page 72

⁴⁹ Sibanda, J. (2017). Understanding distributed leadership in South African schools: Challenges and prospects. *Issues in Educational Research*, 27(3), 567–581.

responsibilities are included in the work plans of SMT members⁵⁰, and are then documented and shared with other staff and learners. This is necessary to ensure accountability and reduce confusion around who leads which activities.

Distributed leadership is also important in sustaining school improvement. Leadership responsibilities and skills are shared among a team of people. This means that when a principal leaves the school, there is still a leadership team with a shared vision and strong institutional knowledge, and they can continue to support school improvement.

3.3 Operations

School operations are the administrative, logistical, and organisational processes that keep a school functioning effectively. These include:

- Financial management
- Human resource management
- Scheduling
- Resource allocation
- Record-keeping
- Data management.

When these are well run, they create stability and a predictable environment. Strengthening operations is therefore a valuable way to strengthen school improvement. This is especially important because schools face numerous barriers when trying to strengthen operations.

Principals often struggle to balance the demands of their role: in addition to being instructional leaders, they are responsible for overseeing the school's operations and day-to-day management. Additionally, because there is no mandated training for principals, they are often not trained for their role⁵¹. Because of this, operational responsibilities can take more time than necessary and detract from principals being able to fulfil other leadership responsibilities.

There are various ways to support school operations. These include professional development and supporting schools with administration and operations where appropriate. Providing additional capacity in key administrative areas can help streamline school operations' processes. This means the principal and SMT can focus more on instructional leadership and building up their educators' capabilities.

⁵⁰ For guidance on developing a work plan, see Department of Basic Education. (n.d. -c). [Quality management system \(QMS\)—development of a work plan for principals](#).

⁵¹ Naidoo. *South African Journal of Education*, 39(2), Article 1534.

3.3.1 Human resources

Support for human resource management in schools will vary significantly according to the context. Partners should support schools with human resource management only if invited to do so by the SGB and principal. When looking to support a school, your contribution to human resources should be discussed in detail and agreed upon with the school and, if necessary, the provincial education department.

3.3.1.1 Recruitment

In public schools, the DBE determines post allocation for educators and non-teaching staff in each school using post provisioning norms (PPN)⁵². The PPN formula for post allocation is based heavily on learner enrolment. It also accounts for curriculum needs and subjects offered, educator availability, the number of learners with special needs, and equity considerations⁵³. In September every year, the provincial department communicates post allocation to schools for the following year. The SGB advises the provincial department of vacant posts, and the department advertises these posts.

No-fee schools in South Africa are restricted in the number of staff they can hire. In fee-paying schools, the SGB can use fees to hire additional operations staff or educators directly, which reduces pressure on educators and leads to smaller class sizes. Helping no-fee schools employ additional staff can reduce pressure on educators and enable schools to meet their operational responsibilities more easily. This help can occur by:

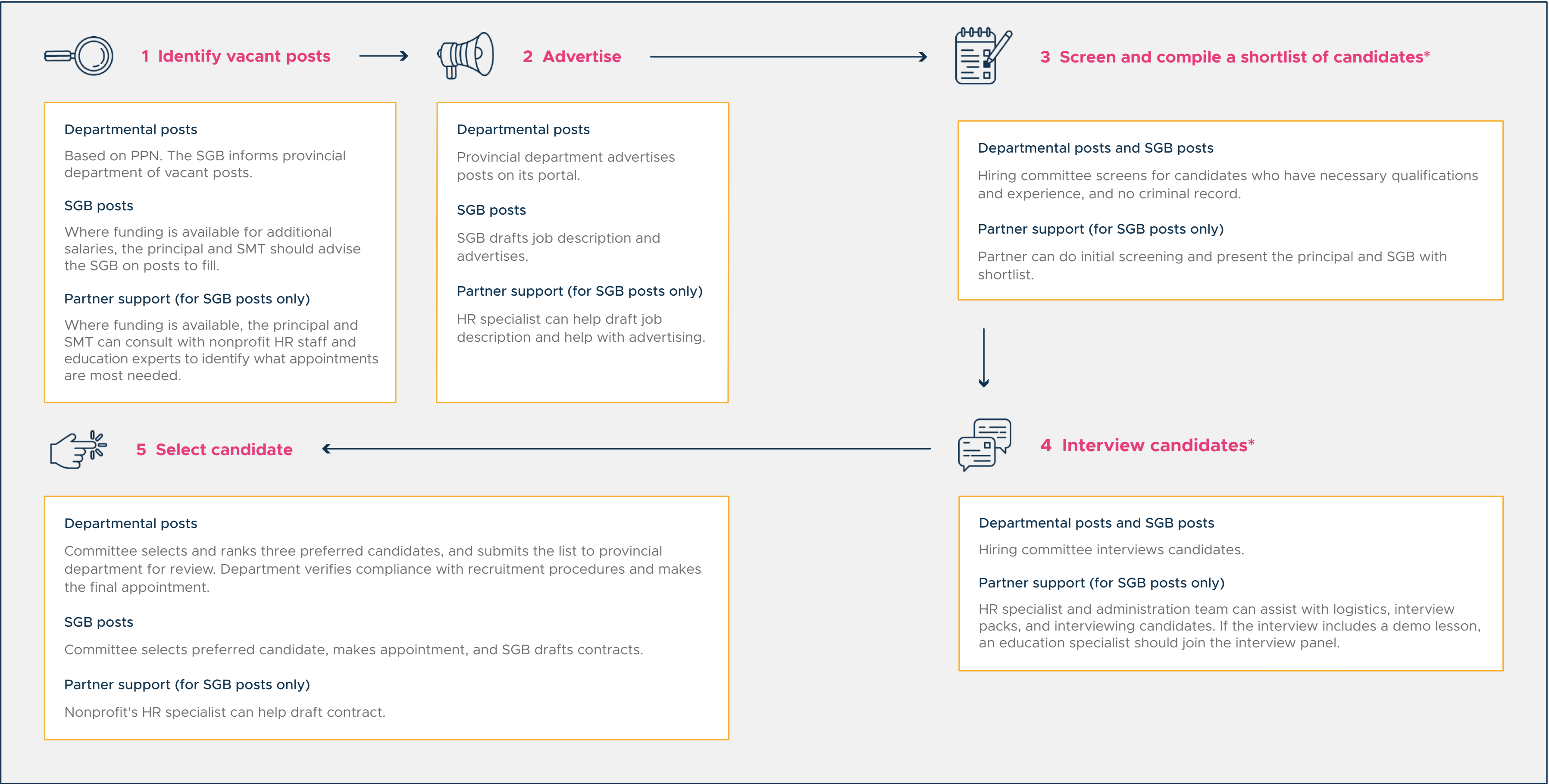
- Providing schools with funding that the school uses to hire additional staff.
- Facilitating the hiring of staff through employment stimulus programmes.
- Guiding SGBs in fundraising for additional salaries.

Recruitment should follow a set, rigorous process to select the best possible candidates. When hiring for a departmental post, follow the criteria set out by the department. The SGB is responsible for hiring for non-departmental posts. Hiring committees should include SGB members, the principal, educator representatives, and, when hiring for a departmental post, a departmental observer and union representative should be present.

⁵² Department of Education. (2006). [Post provisioning: Conceptual framework, analysis of the data and way forward](#).

⁵³ See Sephton, S. (2017). Post provisioning. In F. Veriava (Ed.), [Basic Education Rights Handbook](#). SECTION27.

Recruitment process



*When a hiring committee develops a shortlist, it can ask candidates to write a competency test, which a partner’s education experts can help administer and assess. Candidates should achieve a highly proficient score for a test designed for learners in the highest grade they will be teaching. At Apex High Eersteriver, for example, candidates must all write a competency test and achieve a minimum of 75% to be considered for shortlisting.

As part of the interview process, candidates may be asked to teach a demo lesson and receive feedback on this lesson.

Including a competency test and demo lesson for the interview panel does demand extra time from a hiring committee. However, it means that any appointee knows the high standards expected of them, and the school can be confident the appointee will succeed in their role.

If any additional criteria are used, confirm that these adhere to departmental regulations for recruitment when hiring for department posts.

3.3.1.2 Hiring additional staff

If funding is available for additional salaries, it can be challenging to decide which staff to hire. Employing additional qualified educators supports teaching and learning. However, it is costly, and sustaining funding for these posts can be difficult. Consider filling alternative positions, such as facilitators⁵⁴, administrators, and teaching assistants. These posts all provide educators with additional support, either in the classroom or with meeting administrative responsibilities. Administrators can also help principals and SMTs with their administrative tasks.

Axiom has employed staff through public employment programmes⁵⁵, enabling them to expand their learner support programmes and help schools strengthen administration. If you are appointing staff through these funds, focus on employing community members. This helps improve engagement between a school and community, while schools benefit from community members' local knowledge and insights into children's needs.

3.3.1.3 Performance management

In South African public schools, line managers⁵⁶ conduct performance management reviews using the quality management system (QMS)⁵⁷. QMS has the potential to be a useful resource for strengthening accountability and identifying potential areas for performance improvement. It also helps recognise areas in which an educator may be able to share good practices with colleagues. You can help schools strengthen performance management systems through professional development offerings and in an advisory capacity. This can include:

- 1 Facilitating professional development for the principal and SMT members in conducting QMS performance appraisals and developing training plans for educators. As the relationship evolves, an SMT member will take on this development role and support new SMT members.
- 2 Encouraging the SMT to host professional development for all staff to make sure that they are clear on how QMS is implemented in the school. Partners can assist in conducting this training, but with time, an SMT member will run this professional development.

⁵⁴ Apex Education has successfully employed facilitators who work in their blended learning classrooms (page 56).

⁵⁵ For more information on employment stimulus programmes, see DGMT. (2023). Social Employment Fund (SEF) partnership: Partnering to bring the SEF to communities across South Africa. *Hands-on: Experience Learning*, 25; Huston, K. (2025). *Public employment programmes (PEPs) and foundation phase literacy: A rapid scan of PEP design and compatibility*. Binding Constraints Lab.

⁵⁶ Personnel Administrative Measures (PAM) details line management structures. Department of Basic Education. (2022). *Personnel administrative measures (PAM)*.

⁵⁷ Department of Basic Education. (n.d. -d) *QMS comprehensive school resources package*.

- 3 Working with the principal and SMT to track overall performance trends and areas needing improvement that emerge from appraisals. These can inform professional development and annual planning.

3.3.2 Financial management

A school's SGB is responsible for financial oversight and for structuring and finalising the budget, with the school principal and the school bursar in charge of managing finances. Providing the principal, bursar, or administrators with support in financial management (either through training and coaching or by taking on administrative duties) alleviates pressure on the principal. This is especially beneficial if a principal does not have a supportive SGB or a strong bursar.

3.3.3 Professional development

Professional development for non-teaching staff helps strengthen school operations. This can include:

- The introduction of and training in using software and programmes such as [Data Driven Districts](#)⁵⁸ (DDD), Power BI, and [Staffroom](#)⁵⁹ to support planning and data management.
- Assistance with strengthening or streamlining human resources and financial processes.
- Equipping schools to manage the education department's administrative and reporting demands.

This professional development can take place through training and coaching. As with teaching staff, a partner should gradually transmit responsibility to the school for the professional development of non-teaching staff⁶⁰.

3.3.4 Data management

Having detailed data on all school activities is essential for planning, identifying priority needs, monitoring progress, and building on successes. Therefore, schools need sound data management practices, with clear processes for deciding what data is used, inputting data into relevant programmes, and ensuring that data is analysed and informs planning. Often, data is unavailable, poorly entered into the relevant data-capturing system, or not analysed once it is captured.

Lack of time is a major reason for poor data management in schools. The principal and staff realise the value of data but are balancing many responsibilities. Additionally, staff may lack practical training in data management practices.

⁵⁸ www.dbedashboard.co.za

⁵⁹ www.mystaffroom.net

⁶⁰ See page 61 for recommended techniques and approaches to professional development.

All schools use [SA-SAMS](#) (The South African School Administration and Management System)⁶¹ to capture data such as learner enrolment, attendance, assessments, and staff information. This data should be uploaded to the [DDD dashboard](#)⁶² which aggregates data and visualises key indicators in real-time. When used well, DDD supports decision-making at school, district, provincial, and national levels.

The DBE provides schools with initial training on DDD, but schools often require follow-up support and coaching to take full advantage of the dashboard's capabilities. A partner, SMT member, or, if required, an external expert can provide this support.

When partners provide training⁶³ on data management, they can help schools streamline processes and free up time. Where possible, consider hiring additional administrative staff. This is especially powerful in smaller schools where the DBE does not provide for an administrative post. In these cases, Axiom employs administrative clerks through the SEF⁶⁴. This has facilitated better data management, allowing principals and their staff to visualise and analyse data effectively and use it to inform their planning. It also provides Axiom with access to valuable data to monitor how their support is translating to impact and what adjustments might be needed.



⁶¹ The Western Cape Education Department uses CEMIS (Centralised Educational Management Information System) and not SA-SAMS as their information management system. DDD is not compatible with CEMIS. Schools in the Western Cape can select alternative programmes such as Power BI to visualise data and guide decision-making.

⁶² For more information about DDD, see www.dbedashboard.co.za

⁶³ This can include training principals and educators. Schools can access further information on training at www.dbedashboard.co.za

⁶⁴ Schools are also able to employ education assistants through the Basic Education Employment Initiative.



4 Towards instructional change

Instructional change involves adapting and improving curriculum planning, assessment methodology, and lesson delivery to enhance learner outcomes. Scholarship, available resources, and, importantly, a school's unique context should inform the ways in which a school approaches instructional change.

In South African schools, systemic constraints can prevent consistent, high-quality instruction. These constraints include:

- Educators whose pre-service training did not prepare them for their role
- Overcrowded classrooms
- Professional development that does not meet educators' needs and contexts
- Curriculum demands⁶⁵.

While schools carry the responsibility for delivering quality education, partners can support instructional improvement.

A clear education programme provides a structure to guide a school and its partner in planning for instructional change and improved teaching and learning outcomes. Decide together on an education programme. You can draw on principles from other programmes to develop one that relates to your organisational theory of change and expertise, and is suited to the school's context. Axiom's guide to supporting and improving schools offers a comprehensive discussion on conceptualising an education programme⁶⁶.

This chapter focuses on supporting schools to create environments that enable sustained improvements in teaching and learning. It emphasises the importance of working with school leaders to select and implement instructional approaches that are both evidence-informed and suited to South African realities.

⁶⁵ Christie, P. (Ed.). (2022). *Perspectives on learning backlogs in South African schooling*. Zenex Foundation; Taylor, N. (2019). Inequalities in teacher knowledge in South Africa. In N. Spaul & J. D. Jansen (Eds.), *South African schooling: The enigma of inequality: A study of the present situation and future possibilities* (pp. 263–282). Springer International Publishing.

⁶⁶ Axiom Education. 2025. *Public School Partnerships: A guide to supporting & improving schools*. DGMT. p. 31.

4.1 Choosing an instructional approach

An instructional approach is the “how” of teaching. It is underpinned by:

- A specific teaching philosophy
- A set of desired educational outcomes
- Classroom activities and resources
- Preferred methods of assessment.

An instructional approach informs the strategies an educator uses to facilitate learning⁶⁷. When educators in a school adopt a shared instructional approach, it creates consistency across teaching and learning, and learners come to know what to expect in class.

4.1.1 Planning for instructional change

Every school exists in its unique context, so the ways in which each school can most effectively achieve positive change are also unique. Carefully consider how (or whether) instructional approaches and teaching methods that have been successfully implemented elsewhere could inform or be adapted to the school.

Successful instructional change depends on an educator body that is committed to reflecting on existing practices and working together. The educators work under a team of strong instructional leaders to implement teaching practices that address learners' needs and meet curriculum demands. The SMT should analyse teaching and learning in the school to identify how it can help improve educators' practices in ways that are impactful but do not place unrealistic pressure on educators. Partners should work together with the SMT to support this work, which can include the following:

- A senior staff member from your organisation with education and leadership experience meets with the school's head of academics (who is typically a deputy principal) responsible for instruction to discuss current classroom practices and analyse learner results.
- A senior staff member meets with other SMT members or experienced educators who may hold academic portfolios to hold planning sessions. This helps identify where educators believe they could benefit from assistance. It is especially important in larger schools where SMT members and other educators are responsible for some academic activities.

⁶⁷ See Department of Education and Training, State of Victoria. (2020). *High impact teaching strategies*. for a review of instructional practices that have consistently proven to increase learner outcomes.

- A senior staff member conducts school walks and classroom observations with the principal and SMT members to gather insights into what is actually happening in practice. This helps inform planning towards instructional improvement⁶⁸.

Once you and the school understand the current state of teaching and learning, you can work alongside the principal and SMT to decide on how best to approach instruction in ways that respond to the school's strengths and priorities.

Instructional change and improvement are ongoing. These early-stage activities must continue throughout the partnership to monitor progress and adapt planning where necessary. Initially, you may be heavily involved, and your instruction specialist should meet weekly with the school's head of academics. Over time, this frequency will reduce, and meetings can be shorter or take place online. Throughout the partnership, you should hold termly meetings to review academic results and monitor a school's progress in implementing its SIP. However, the goal from the start should be developing SMT members to assume these responsibilities independently.

Apex Education, Axiom, Common Good, and Education Ally have drawn on aspects of existing instructional frameworks and classroom methodologies in advising schools on their approach to instruction. They have then adjusted these to suit individual schools. The process includes using methodologies and practices from *Get Better Faster*, *Driven by Data*, and *Teach Like a Champion*⁶⁹, which they have adapted to suit the schools in which they work. The four organisations have looked particularly at:

- Using data-driven instruction (DDI) to guide the use of instructional strategies that respond to learners' needs.
- Promoting routines and classroom management techniques that support a productive teaching and learning environment⁷⁰.
- Developing principals and SMT members as instructional leaders⁷¹.

⁶⁸ See page 35 for more details on the importance of school walks.

⁶⁹ Bambrick-Santoyo, P. (2016). *Get better faster: A 90-day plan for developing new teachers*. Jossey-Bass; Bambrick-Santoyo, P. (2019). *Driven by data 2.0: A practical guide to improve instruction* (Second edition). Jossey-Bass; Lemov, D. (2015). *Teach like a champion 2.0: 62 techniques that put students on the path to college* (Second edition). Jossey-Bass.

⁷⁰ See page 52

⁷¹ See page 62

4.2 Improving instructional practices

A coherent instructional approach, aligned with the school's vision for improvement, provides clear expectations and a shared roadmap for achieving goals. The principal, SMT, and partner should consider the most effective way to strengthen instructional practices. Apex Education, Axiom, Common Good, and Education Ally have promoted DDI to improve instructional practices⁷².

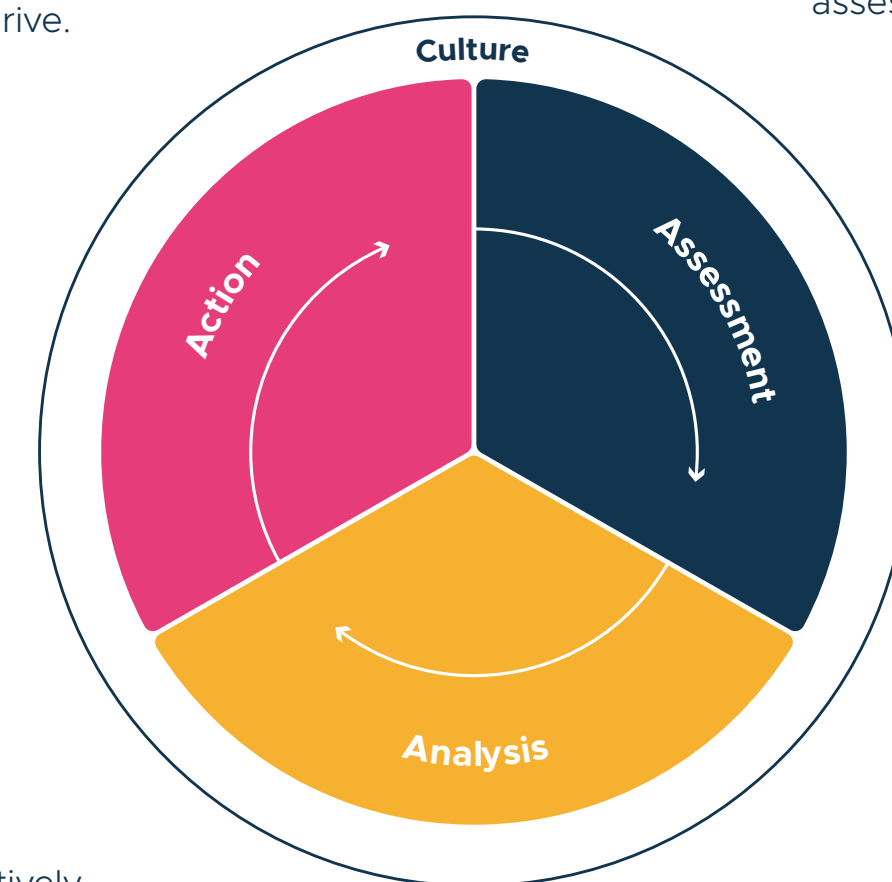
4.2.1 Data-driven instruction

DDI is an instructional approach where educators gather and analyse information about learners' performance. They use this information to make informed decisions about how to teach in ways that best address learning needs. DDI is founded on four principles: assessment, analysis, action, and culture.

Four key principles of DDI (adapted from Common Good)

Create an environment in which data-driven instruction can survive and thrive.

Create rigorous assessments that provide meaningful data.



Teach more effectively what learners most need to learn.

Examine results to correctly identify causes of strength and shortcomings.

⁷² Bambrick-Santoyo, P. (2019). *Driven by data 2.0: A practical guide to improve instruction* (Second edition). Jossey-Bass.



“Our SMT members who are coaching teachers on how to use data effectively are seeing rapid improvements in scholar performance. It’s not just about gathering the data — the real power lies in what you do with it afterwards. By interrogating the data, identifying the root causes of gaps, and acting with purpose — closing those gaps through targeted re-teaching — we create a cycle of continuous improvement that drives results.”

— Renate van der Westhuizen, founding principal, Apex High Eersteriver

Through the process of assessment, analysis, and action, educators can see what learners already know, what they need to know, and how to bridge gaps between existing and required knowledge.

The success of DDI depends on the school principal, with the support of their SMT, instilling a schoolwide data-driven culture where data is valued and informs decision-making and planning.

The principal shapes this culture by creating space for data meetings in the calendar and including DDI in professional development. They must also monitor progress to ensure that assessment, analysis, and action are ongoing.

When planning for instructional change, consider educators’ existing knowledge and practices. Promote an instructional approach and classroom practices that build on what schools are already doing and fit within the demands of the South African education system.



“We were very thoughtful about not bringing a new thing that teachers are responsible for. It was very important that this correctly aligns with what teachers are doing, to show them that you’re already doing this. It’s adding value to assessment, analysis, [and] action.”

— Zenobia Williams, Curriculum and Assessment Specialist, Common Good

4.2.2 Rigorous assessments

In South Africa, educators often do not receive enough training and support in conducting and moderating assessments⁷³. They may struggle to set assessments that are meaningful measures of progress and that enable them to identify where learners need

additional support, as well as how to adjust instructional practices accordingly.

DDI depends on rigorous assessments providing meaningful data that lets educators respond to learning gaps and teach more effectively.

When there are clear trends

in learning gaps, it can point to areas where educators need additional support. The results of well-developed, school-based assessments are therefore also valuable in informing professional development planning.

4.2.2.1 Common Schools Assessments

As a way of promoting DDI, in 2022, Common Good introduced the Common Schools Assessments (CSAs) to model the development, moderation, and marking of assessments. CSAs are home language and mathematics assessments that Grade 3, 6, and 9 learners write in June every year. In 2025, 27 schools across the Eastern Cape, Northern Cape, North West, and Western Cape wrote CSAs⁷⁴.

The South African curriculum, CAPS (Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements), mandates that learners complete termly school-based assessments to determine what they have learnt. CSAs align with CAPS, which means they can serve as school-based assessments and do not take up additional time in the timetable.

In the first year that a school writes CSAs, Common Good is heavily involved and supports schools directly with administering the assessments, marking, and data capturing. With Common Good’s guidance, schools then take on responsibility for administering, marking, and internal moderation. Common Good provides practical guidelines for these processes. This includes:

- Clarifying roles and responsibilities for each stage of CSAs.
- Conducting school walks with the principal and department heads to observe assessment administration.
- Providing an instructional coach to mark a few scripts along with educators, and to do an initial round of reviewing the marking, to see if educators need further support.

Education experts from Apex Education, Axiom, Common Good, and Education Ally are responsible for developing the CSAs and memos each year. After schools have done internal moderations, CSAs are externally moderated by former principals and educators who have assessment expertise. Common Good assumes practical and financial responsibility for printing and distributing the CSAs.

⁷³ Kanjee, A., Roberts, N., Sadeck, O., & Ramollo, J. (2022). Entrenching performativity or enhancing pedagogy: Addressing the challenge of assessment policy and practice. *Journal of Education*, 87, 1–23.

⁷⁴ For further information on CSAs, contact lizaan.williams@commongood.org.za

CSAs act as a benchmark for assessment across schools in all provinces. This is especially valuable because there is no standardised assessment until learners write Matric (except for the Western Cape, where learners write systemic assessments in Grades 3, 6, and 9).

CSAs hold multiple benefits:

- They serve as baseline assessments when an organisation partners with a new school.
- They are written as school-based assessments and therefore do not place significant additional pressure on schools, which often happens when administering external assessments.
- They provide a credible, reliable assessment of learner achievement and improvement that can inform academic planning.
- They are a potential resource for school districts, especially in provinces with district-wide assessment requirements. In the Eastern Cape, for example, Axiom has partnered with district officials to integrate CSAs into district practices.

4.3 A productive teaching and learning environment

In a productive learning environment, learners understand what is expected of them, what is required to meet these expectations, and the rationale behind them. Learners participate in class and take ownership of their learning. A productive environment has structure. There are routines and rules that guide behaviour, but there is also engagement between the educator and learners, and among the learners themselves. It takes consistent effort from educators and learners to ensure a productive environment⁷⁵.

The following three aspects are central to improving and maintaining productive learning in classrooms:

- 1 Purposeful, well-structured lessons
- 2 Clear and consistent routines
- 3 Adherence to the timetable.

⁷⁵For more detailed guidelines on techniques that help strengthen productivity, consult Peddie, B. et al. (2024). *Foundational classroom management resources handbook*. Australian Education Research Organisation.

4.3.1 Purposeful, well-structured lessons

Well-structured lessons have clear objectives and logical sequencing. They are informed by curriculum requirements, what learners already know, and what they need to learn to meet requirements. The following questions can guide educators in planning these lessons:

- What are the lesson’s learning objectives?
- What do learners need to know to meet lesson objectives?
- How will the class start?
- What are the learning activities?
- How will learners’ understanding be checked?
- How will the class end?

When lessons follow a clear structure, it creates order and consistency across a school. Using the same routines for every class means that learners always know what is expected of them. Having a set activity at the start and end of a class also helps with settling a class and creating consistent practices across the school⁷⁶.

Having a clear teaching strategy, which is a deliberate approach to helping learners acquire skills and knowledge, can also help educators structure effective lessons. Educators then focus on how they deliver content and on what activities need to take place for successful learning. An example of this is the gradual release of responsibility model, also known as “I do, we do, you do”. The following table shows how an educator would use this model when the lesson’s learning activity involves constructing an introduction for a literature essay.

⁷⁶Examples of these are starting a lesson with a “[do now](#)” activity and finishing with an “[exit ticket](#)”.

I do, we do, you do example (adapted from Apex Education training notes)

Lesson stage	Activity
I do	• The educator explains to learners how to write an effective introduction to a literature essay. • The educator shows (i.e., models to) learners step-by-step how to write an effective introduction to a literature essay.
We do	• The educator asks learners to name the steps they modelled in the “I do” activity. • The educator asks learners questions about how to write an introduction to a literature essay. • Learners guide the educator to write an introduction to a literature essay.
You do	• Each learner works independently and practises writing an introduction. • The educator monitors and provides individual and group feedback.

4.3.2 Clear and consistent routines

School routines are the consistent procedures and practices that all staff and learners follow, such as lining up, transitioning between venues, and the activities at the start and end of lessons⁷⁷. Routines are not about controlling learners; they are about promoting a stable and safe environment for learning. Educators should communicate this to learners so that they understand the reasons for routines and managing behaviour, and then guide learners in practising routines.



“The reason for routines is so that the real stuff can happen. Once you have culture and order and discipline in place, then you can get into the heart of improving instruction.”

— Craig Paxton, Executive Director, Axiom Education

⁷⁷ Apex Education, Axiom, Common Good and Education Ally have drawn widely on methods and techniques from [Teach Like a Champion](#) and Bambrick-Santoyo, P. (2016). *Get better faster: A 90-day plan for developing new teachers*. Jossey-Bass. The nonprofit Edufundi’s YouTube [channel](#) provides videos demonstrating some of these techniques.

Establishing new routines takes time and effort. When starting or strengthening routines, it can be useful to have goals that educators and learners can work towards. This can include goals such as improving punctuality and reducing the time learners spend moving between classrooms.

If educators celebrate learners who succeed in meeting these goals, it can create motivation to adhere to routines. This can be individual praise or a principal acknowledging a specific class in assembly for achievements such as improved punctuality or lower absenteeism rates.

4.3.3 Adhering to the timetable

Maximising teaching and learning time is a characteristic common to high-achieving schools⁷⁸. Schools should be committed to following the timetable, ensuring that educators and learners are in class when scheduled, and to minimising disruptions to the regular timetable.

For less experienced principals and deputy principals, timetable development and creating an annual school calendar can be daunting. Partners can work alongside the principal and deputy principal to carry out this planning, which takes place in the fourth term in preparation for the next academic year. Schools can use software such as Staffroom⁷⁹ to develop timetables, but these still need to be reviewed to ensure that they can be practically implemented.

4.4 Digital learning

Digital learning refers to the use of technology to enhance teaching and learning processes. Digital learning has shown positive results globally⁸⁰. The power of digital learning does not lie in giving learners access to devices or the internet, but in how the technology is used. Successful digital learning has a clear purpose and outcomes, complements the curriculum and learning requirements, and is implemented by trained educators and facilitators⁸¹.

⁷⁸ NEEDU. (2017). [Policy brief 1: Use of teaching time](#).

⁷⁹ [www.mystaffroom.net](#)

⁸⁰ UNICEF. (2021). [Effectiveness of digital learning solutions to improve educational outcomes](#).

⁸¹ Zenex Foundation’s [learning brief](#) on ICTs in early grade mathematics in South Africa provides a good overview of some of the challenges, considerations, and benefits associated with using technology-based learning in South Africa. While it refers to early grade mathematics programmes specifically, the findings in the brief are relevant to other grades and learning areas (Centre for the Advancement of Science and Mathematics Education. (2023). [ICTs in early-grade mathematics education in South Africa: A learning brief](#). Zenex Foundation).

Before implementing any device-based learning, be sure you can respond “yes” to these questions:

- Is there necessary infrastructure (sufficient devices, consistent and reliable power supply, safe storage, and connectivity) in place, and does the school have practical plans to maintain it?
- Are there experts available to train and support educators and facilitators to integrate digital tools into their teaching?
- Are school leaders and educators motivated to learn and adopt new ways of delivering the curriculum?
- Is there a plan in place for ongoing training, coaching, and support?
- Have you identified potential digital learning programmes that are CAPS-aligned, in the appropriate language, and that meet learning needs?
- Are there viable plans to maintain devices, monitor usage and learning progress, and ensure the long-term sustainability of the programme?⁸²

Digital learning programmes and platforms serve different purposes. They will typically focus on either covering the curriculum content, mastering the curriculum content, or closing existing learning gaps. Be clear about how you want digital learning to support overall learning and then select the programmes accordingly.

If you rush decisions around digital learning, you may introduce programmes that educators are not confident in using or that are not suited to the intended learning outcomes. The value of any resource depends on how it is used. Even if educators initially respond positively to training, there must be an extended period of coaching and support when implementing a new resource.

This section draws on Education Ally and Apex Education’s experiences and progress in supporting blended and digital learning to showcase the benefits.

4.4.1 Apex Education’s blended learning model

Blended learning (or hybrid learning) combines in-person teaching with online or digital learning. In Apex’s blended learning model, teaching takes place in person and through online videos or demonstrations. There are 100 learners in a class with one qualified educator and two facilitators always present to provide in-person support as needed.

The model is cost-effective, as the facilitators do not need to be qualified educators, which reduces salary costs. Facilitators are often pre-service educators or hold a special interest in education. Apex Education’s Head of Blended Learning trains all

⁸² For guidance on using digital technology, see Education Endowment Fund. (2019). [Using digital technology to improve learning](#).

facilitators and educators, and coaches each educator and facilitator weekly, using instructional coaching methods⁸³.

In a blended learning classroom, which is a dedicated computer lab, each learner has their own computer and headphones. Learners access pre-recorded content, materials, assessments, and activities via Apex’s online learning management system and can work at their own pace. This provides a more personalised learning pathway.



“In the blended learning class, there is so much more data. So you can respond on an individual level to a child to understand where they are, what they need.”

— Jana du Plooy, CEO, Apex Education

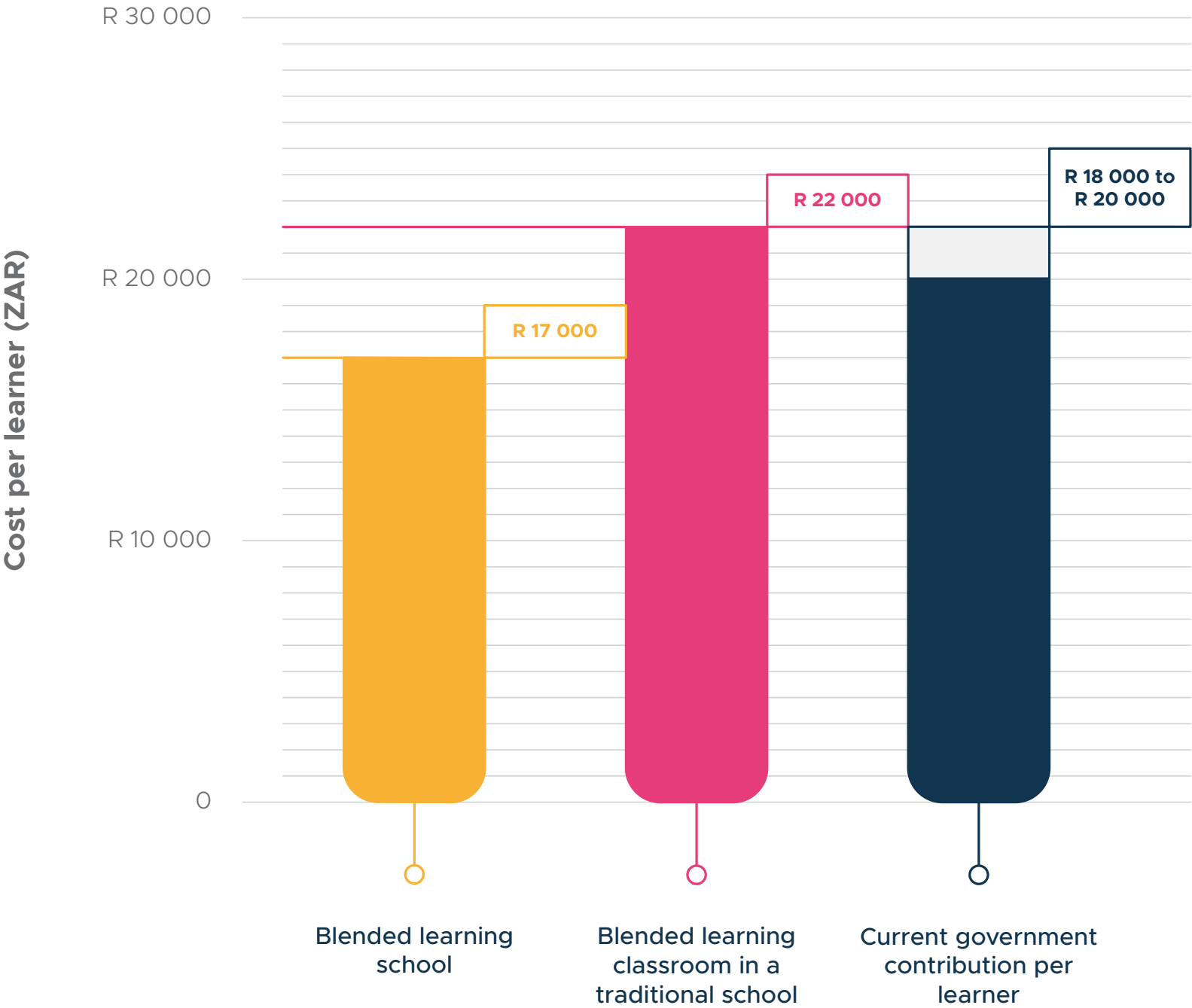
Because educators are not focused on presenting content, they have additional time to assist learners in engaging with content. This includes reteaching content gaps that are evident from the real-time data available to educators as learners move through the lesson. A key strength of the model is the quality and depth of data that educators can access immediately. This data enables them to identify gaps in learning and respond to individual learners’ specific needs, which helps strengthen DDI.



⁸³ See page 68

Apex Education introduced the blended learning model with replication in mind and has produced a [blueprint](#)⁸⁴, which is a useful resource for schools and nonprofits seeking guidance on blended learning. It has adopted the same model at Apex Stellenbosch, a low-fee independent school in Kayamandi. There are schools in Gauteng, the Eastern Cape, and the Western Cape, who are outside of Apex Education's network of schools, who are now using a blended learning model and Apex's learning management system. Apex Education stresses that to implement the model successfully, quality leadership and a positive school culture are imperative.

Annual cost-per-learner comparison



Source: **Apex Education**

⁸⁴ Apex Education's (2024) [blueprint](#) for blended learning explains the reasoning underpinning their decision to adopt a blended learning model and how they have approached implementation. It provides guidance for anyone interested in finding out more about blended learning: www.apex-schools.org

4.4.2 Education Ally's use of digital learning

Education Ally works in one primary school and one high school in Cape Town, where digital learning has been successfully embedded in some subjects within the teaching day⁸⁵. This success rests on careful planning, the human element, and ensuring that each programme links directly to teaching and learning activities.

Education Ally employs blended learning facilitators who work directly with educators, using real-time data to identify where learners are stuck. They can then respond with targeted support in the form of reteaching, extension, or small-group coaching. This targeted support means that learners can master gaps in content and knowledge efficiently, which has helped accelerate learning.



"We've seen outstanding results with [Green Shoots](#)⁸⁶ — especially when a facilitator is present in the computer lab. The human element matters most: linking what happens in class with what learners do independently in the labs. Teachers use Green Shoots data to inform instruction, reteach key concepts, and plan targeted small-group support. When teachers circulate, track progress, and correct misconceptions in real-time, learner outcomes improve dramatically."

— Khayakazi Namfu, CEO, Education Ally

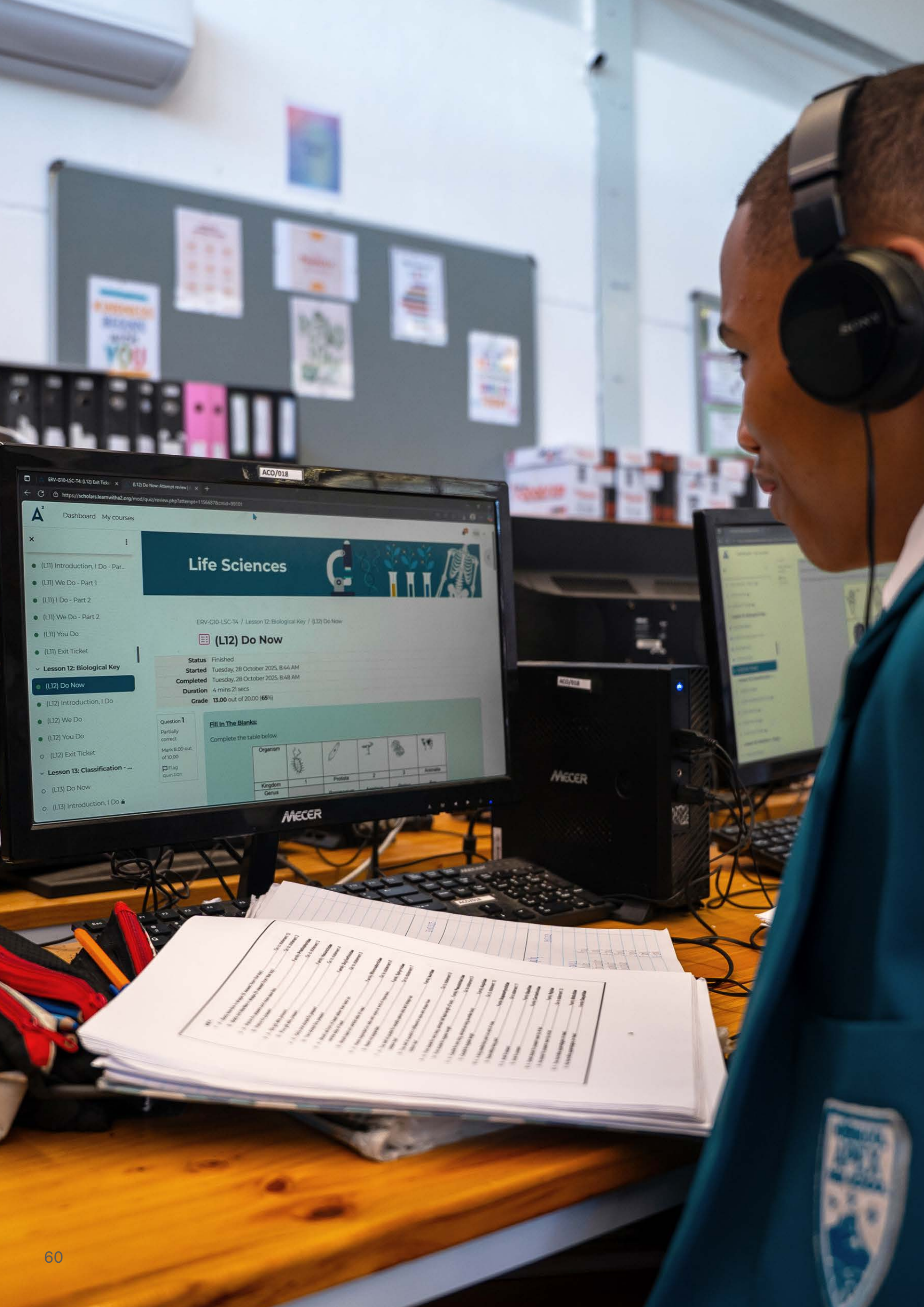
Digital learning programmes are also a useful supplement to academic support. They provide personalised learning for learners who face backlogs and still need to master content that was covered in previous grades. At the high school level, educators have found that when learners learn on programmes like [Siyavula](#)⁸⁷ and [Reflective Learning](#)⁸⁸, they benefit from individualised learning possibilities and the ability to focus on mastering content. This is particularly beneficial for learners who participate in extra lessons after school and on Saturdays. The programmes help pinpoint where learners most need assistance and give them opportunities to practise in these specific areas.

⁸⁵ All classes share one computer lab in the school, and use it for specific, targeted sessions in some subjects.

⁸⁶ www.greenshootsedu.co.za

⁸⁷ www.siyavula.com

⁸⁸ www.reflectivelearning.co



5 Professional development

Professional development is a key driver of instructional change. It offers educators ongoing opportunities to strengthen their knowledge, skills, and teaching practices, leading to improved learner outcomes.

Effective professional development combines two key elements: training and coaching.

Training gives educators access to new knowledge, strategies, and tools that they can use in their classrooms. Coaching follows training. Coaches provide ongoing, personalised support to help educators translate training skills into practice. When training and coaching are combined, professional development becomes a continuous cycle of learning, application, and improvement that benefits educators and learners.

Teaching and non-teaching staff should receive professional development training and coaching. While this section mainly discusses the professional development of instructional leaders and teaching staff, partners can use the same approaches to professional development for administrative and operations staff.

For professional development to be successful, ensure that it is:

- Rooted in the school's SIP and instructional priorities.
- Informed by observation and data, and responsive to needs identified through classroom observations, learner assessments, or educator feedback.
- Scheduled in the annual school calendar and taking place as planned.
- Practical and participatory, including demonstrations, opportunities to practise, and real classroom materials.
- Led by or co-led with the SMT. The ultimate goal is for the SMT to take all responsibility for professional development.

The principal, with the support of their SMT, is responsible for training and coaching educators. This is a key component of instructional leadership responsibilities. When there are ongoing opportunities for principals and the SMT to grow as instructional leaders, it helps create structures for more meaningful and effective professional development for all educators.

5.1 Strengthening instructional leadership

In recent years, the benefits of instructional leadership have gained increasing attention⁸⁹. In South Africa, this aspect of leadership is often absent. This is due to extensive managerial and administrative responsibilities, and also due to many principals and SMT members having received limited leadership professional development⁹⁰. Because of this gap, developing instructional leadership practices is one of the most impactful ways to contribute to school improvement.

When you first partner with a school, you may play an intensive, active role in the professional development of all staff. This may be feasible initially, but it requires significant financial and human resources and does not promote sustained improvement. Your commitment should be to support a principal and SMT in growing as instructional leaders who promote professional development and a school culture where teaching and learning can flourish.

The school principal leads change in a school. It is important that the principal and partners have a shared understanding of instructional leadership and how it will contribute to quality teaching and learning. With this shared understanding, you can then work alongside the principal to develop SMT members as instructional leaders. A principal holds a highly pressured role and cannot be the lone driver of school improvement and instructional change.

Instructional leadership needs to be distributed across the SMT. While you may work most closely with a principal, you should also support other SMT members in their growth as instructional leaders. In particular, focus on developing a school's head of academics, who is typically a deputy principal, as an instructional leader. Your contribution to the SMT's development as instructional leaders can be made by directly training and coaching SMT members or by equipping the principal with the necessary skills to develop their staff.

Apex Education, Axiom, Common Good, and Education Ally's instructional staff have attended training at the [Instructional Leadership Institute](#) (ILI)⁹¹. Where possible, Apex Education, Axiom, Common Good, and Education Ally have supported principals and SMT members to attend ILI training. The cost and time of training mean that it is not always logistically viable for principals to attend. In these cases,

⁸⁹ Bush, T. (2013). Instructional leadership and leadership for learning: Global and South African perspectives. *Education as Change*, 17(Supplement 1), S5–S20; Hou, Y. et al. (2019). Impact of instructional leadership on high school student academic achievement in China. *Asia Pacific Education Review*, 20(4), 543–558; Sanchez, J., & Watson, J. (2021). Effective instructional leadership practices in high performing elementary schools. *Journal of School Administration Research and Development*, 6(2), 60–70.

⁹⁰ Bush, T., & Glover, D. (2016). School leadership and management in South Africa: Findings from a systematic literature review. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 30(2), 211–231; Mestry, R. (2017). Empowering principals to lead and manage public schools effectively in the 21st century. *South African Journal of Education*, 37(1), Article 1334.

⁹¹ www.ili.education

the partner's instructional staff draw on the principles of ILI training in supporting principals' and SMTs' development as instructional leaders. A core tenet of this for the organisations listed has been working alongside the principal and SMT to develop their instructional leadership expertise.

5.1.1 Developing instructional leaders

Having a structured approach to working with a principal or SMT member to develop them as an instructional leader provides a good foundation for this important aspect of supporting school improvement.

As a starting point, create awareness and conceptual understanding of instructional leadership, i.e., what it is and how it supports improved learning outcomes. This lets educators see the value in instructional leadership development and helps secure their commitment to a new leadership approach.

How to approach instructional leadership support:

- Provide training on what makes an instructional leader. If possible, this can include group training with principals from various schools. This should cover why instructional leadership matters, what makes a strong instructional leader, and provide examples of impactful leadership practices. It can be helpful to share resources on instructional leadership⁹².
- In this initial stage, show how instructional leadership practices align with DBE policies and templates. For example, discuss how instructional leadership can help a school meet SIP priorities.
- If you have tools and templates that you recommend schools use, train the principal on how to gain maximum value from these tools and how to use them independently.
- The principal should reflect on and develop a vision of what quality teaching and learning looks like in their school, and how their leadership practices can drive this. This includes identifying key practices and instructional goals, and committing to activities that will help realise these goals. Partners should support principals in this and develop a foundation of shared language and purpose to do so.

With this awareness in place, you can move to applying and translating the knowledge and skills covered in training into action through guided practice and feedback:

- Provide the principal with structured opportunities to apply theory in practice. This includes an instructional leadership coach who can support the principal with responsibilities like completing SSEs and SIPs, hosting SMT meetings, conducting joint lesson observations, conducting school walks, and practising providing feedback to educators.

⁹² ILI has produced a series of case studies on the impact of instructional leadership, see [Our impact](#).

- Use a coaching model such as See it, Name it, Do it⁹³ to give structure to each coaching cycle. A coaching cycle includes three phases:
 - 1 Goal setting and pre-planning, where you identify a specific goal.
 - 2 Implementation and monitoring of activities.
 - 3 Reflecting on activities and considering next steps.
- Work with the principal to introduce and co-develop routines such as data reviews and check-ins. In data reviews, an education expert and the principal or school head of academics analyse data related to teaching and learning (such as assessment results, learner attendance, and observation feedback), reflect on progress, and plan next steps. The frequency of these reviews varies depending on a school's needs and may initially be weekly but later shift to monthly or termly.
- The principal should host weekly SMT meetings with clear agendas focused on teaching and learning, not only administration. In the early stages of a partnership, a leadership coach who has experience as a principal may attend some of these meetings to offer guidance and coaching. If these meetings become embedded in school routines, instructional leadership will remain a priority when a partner's involvement reduces.

Embedding new skills takes practice. Principals and the SMT need repeated opportunities to practise instructional leadership tasks and receive feedback on their efforts. Training and coaching are not one-off events, and translating training into practice takes place over numerous coaching cycles. Any new practice can be daunting, and creating a supportive coaching environment must be central to all planning.

As instructional leadership becomes part of a school's rhythm, it is important to reflect on and adapt practices where required. Instructional leadership coaches should use data reviews and check-ins as opportunities to reflect and support a principal and SMT in analysing how leadership is impacting teaching and learning outcomes.

Principals should promote reflection in their SMT meetings, track instructional goals, and use learner assessment data to inform instructional planning. It can be helpful for principals and SMTs from different schools to come together in communities of practice to reflect and learn from one another.

The long-term sustainability of school improvement efforts depends on principals and the SMT internalising instructional leadership practices. Once a principal and SMT have put new practices in place, partner support should turn to helping them embed these practices into the school's culture. You can continue to mentor and coach, but the depth of support will reduce. When it is clear that the principal has embedded instructional leadership habits in their practice, your position can shift to that of a strategic partner available for reflection and to provide guidance as needed.

⁹³ See page 66

5.2 Conducting training

In South Africa, professional development for teaching and non-teaching staff typically takes the form of training sessions and workshops for a group of staff. However, individual training is sometimes necessary for imparting specific knowledge or skills, especially for those working in specialised roles such as a principal.

For training to be successful and lead to sustained outcomes, it should be:

Relevant and practical

- Linking to school priorities and targeting educators' challenges and concerns.
- Emphasising subject knowledge and pedagogy relevant to the curriculum.
- Using real classroom scenarios, examples of learners' work, and school-specific challenges as learning materials.
- Offering concrete, implementable strategies.

Expertly facilitated

- Conducted by knowledgeable presenters who understand the content, demonstrate strategies, and apply adult learning principles.

Interactive and engaging

- Involving educators in interactive activities such as modelling⁹⁴, role-play⁹⁵, and collaborative lesson planning⁹⁶.

Followed by sustained support

- Accompanied by ongoing, follow-up support through coaching, professional learning communities, mentoring, and further training to reinforce and embed learning into practice.

Part of the school schedule

- A non-negotiable in the school's annual calendar. By scheduling professional development sessions and sticking to this schedule, training and coaching become part of the school's rhythm.

⁹⁴ Modelling is the act of demonstrating a skill or behaviour for others to observe and use as an example of "what good looks like".

⁹⁵ Role-playing is acting out scenarios to explore different options and try new practices.

⁹⁶ Collaborative lesson planning is when educators work together to design lessons.

Professional development training does not need to be lengthy. Longer workshops are useful in introducing new topics and creating opportunities to practise new skills. But shorter, regular sessions of 15 to 30 minutes, which SMT members host in weekly or monthly departmental meetings, enable the SMT to provide educators with targeted professional development, as needed.



“When teachers feel that professional development training is useful, aligned, and important, I have seen the traditional barriers of time and capacity melt away.”

— Bronwyn Hiles, Coaching and Training Specialist, Common Good

In schools that partner with Apex Education, Axiom, Common Good, and Education Ally, training is conducted by a variety of people. This includes:

- Training by nonprofit staff only
- A nonprofit and SMT member conducting training together
- An SMT member conducting training.

Partners and schools can also invite external experts, such as departmental officials or education psychologists, to conduct training, depending on who has the necessary knowledge.

In Axiom’s experience of working with small schools located close to each other, bringing together educators from the various schools for professional development is more cost-effective and fosters peer learning.

Communities of practice are a valuable tool for individuals with shared interests and expertise to interact and learn from one another. As part of their leadership support, Common Good hosts a termly professional development afternoon for all the principals and deputy principals they work with in Cape Town. This gives Common Good an opportunity to provide more in-depth training. It is also an important space for the principals and deputies to meet and share their experiences and knowledge.

5.2.1 Training techniques: See it, Name it, Do it

See it, Name it, Do it (translated as *Yijonge, Yichaze, Yenze* in isiXhosa) is a training and coaching model that Apex Education, Axiom, Common Good, and Education Ally have used successfully. It is a practical, three-step framework that helps educators identify effective practices (See It), discuss and analyse the practices they observe (Name It), and implement the practices through rehearsal or guided practice (Do It)⁹⁷. The three steps offer a framework that equips educators to move from observing to enacting practices. This is a move away from more theory-heavy training, which often overlooks the practical application of what is taught.

⁹⁷ Further information and examples of using the framework can be found in Bambrick-Santoyo, P. (2018). *Leverage leadership 2.0: A practical guide to building exceptional schools*. Jossey-Bass.

See it, Name it, Do it framework

Step	Description	Activities
See it	Participants observe a model of excellent practice to understand "what good looks like".	Trainer does live demonstrations, showing recordings of exemplary practices.
Name it	Participants reflect on the model of excellence, internalise the content, and analyse the methodology.	Participants discuss principles underpinning practices, evaluating why they are effective with the trainer.
Do it	Participants practise what they have learned and receive feedback.	Participants role-play with peers, scripting lesson plans or activities, followed by trainer feedback for improvement.

The measure of successful training is whether participants can translate the skills they were taught in training into practice. Training should be followed by coaching to support educators as they embed skills into practice. Instructional coaching⁹⁸ is an impactful way of achieving this⁹⁹.

5.2.2 Developing school management team (SMT) members as trainers

When you conduct training, use these sessions as opportunities to model training to SMT members, drawing on the See it, Name it, Do it model. This can occur at all steps:

- Showing the SMT member the process of identifying training needs, for example, by analysing learner results.
- Developing a presentation and materials.
- Conducting training.

You can use modelling to introduce a new practice or help an SMT member who is struggling with a specific activity.

⁹⁸ See page 68
⁹⁹ While there are various coaching models, this manual focuses on and recommends instructional coaching as it has proven impactful for Apex Education, Axiom, Common Good, and Education Ally. Zenex Foundation’s [literature review](#) on coaching in education, with a focus on coaching in the South African context, is a comprehensive resource for organisations interested in exploring the possibilities of coaching and alternative coaching methods further (Hofmeyr, J. (2019). [Literature review of coaching in education: From ‘knowing to doing.’](#) Zenex Foundation).

If you plan and conduct training as a team, it can help build the SMT members' confidence, as they have the support of an experienced individual or coach. It can also help the coach gauge strengths and areas for development. This has proven especially beneficial in helping SMT members who know their content but struggle with delivery and staff engagement.

When SMT members conduct professional development training, their coaches can be in attendance to observe and provide feedback on how the training was conducted, using the See it, Name it, Do it technique.

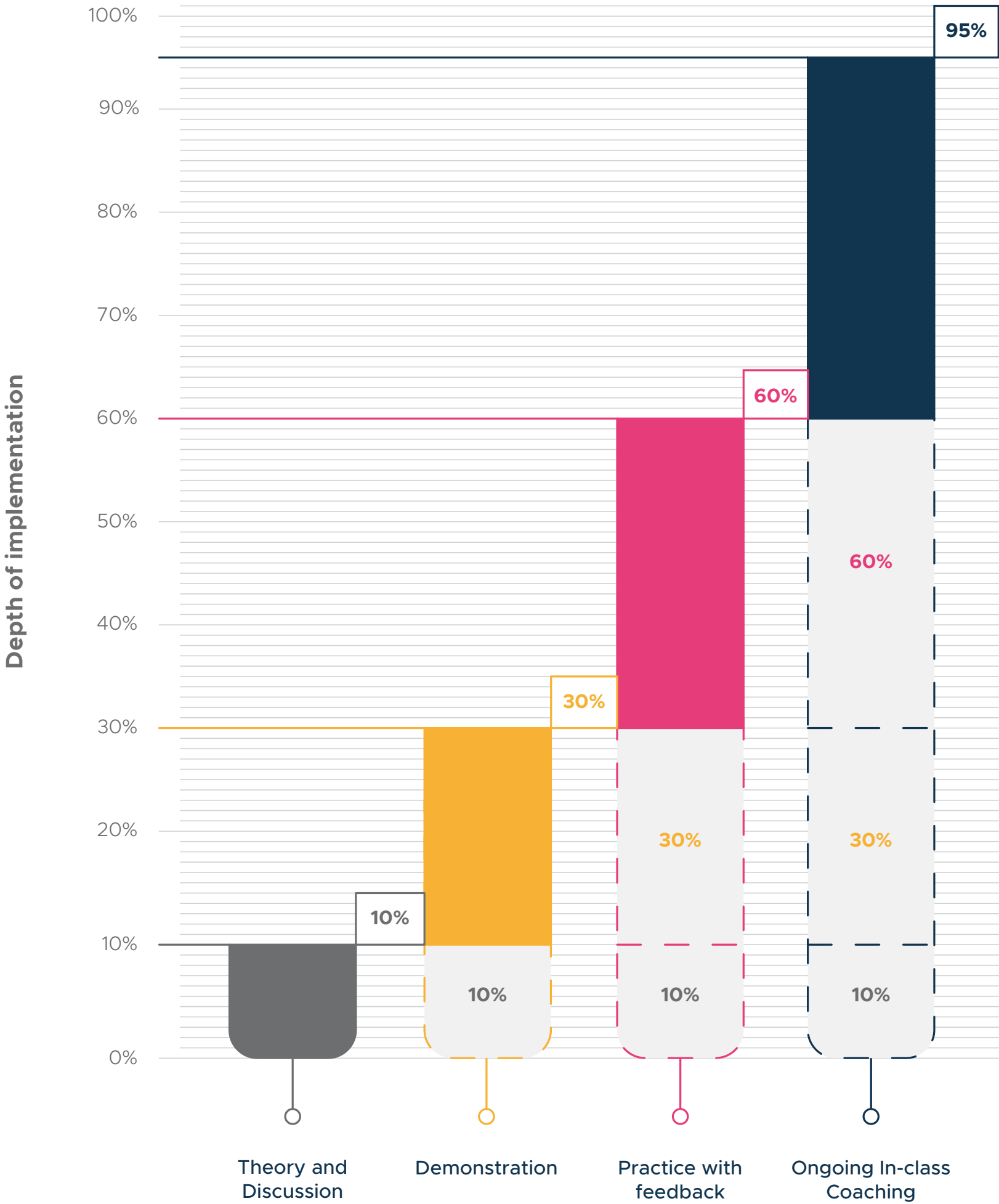
As Apex Education and Common Good have transitioned from leading professional development to the principal and SMT leading it, they have seen an increase in attendance and engagement among staff. The principal and the SMT are always at school. This means they have more opportunities to see what professional development will benefit educators than external trainers and coaches visiting the school would. This is especially true when an SMT is committed to regular school walks and observations.

5.3 Instructional coaching

In most schools, professional development is training- and workshop-based. This can be logistically easier, place less pressure on the SMT, and appear more cost-effective than coaching. However, its long-term impact can be limited. For the skills learnt in training to be embedded in practice, training must be followed by practical implementation and coaching. The importance of this is evident in the following graph, which shows that a combination of training, practice, and coaching significantly increases the depth of knowledge implementation.



The effect of ongoing coaching on the depth of implementation¹⁰⁰



¹⁰⁰ Graph derived from Cornett, J., & Knight, J. (2009). Research on coaching. In J. Knight (Ed.), *Coaching: Approaches & perspectives* (pp. 192–216). Corwin Press.

Coaching takes place through planning, observations, and feedback. In instructional coaching, the coaches, who should themselves be experienced educators, do the following:

- Observe classroom instruction.
- Provide constructive feedback.
- Model effective strategies.
- Collaborate with educators to set goals and implement changes linked to the specific goals.

Instructional coaches can be external experts or peers. They work one-on-one with educators to help them enhance their instructional techniques, classroom management practices, and content knowledge. Coaches also provide ongoing support as educators integrate what they have learnt in training into their teaching practices¹⁰¹.

The instructional coach's role is to support educators in creating a positive learning environment to improve lesson planning and delivery. Coaching is not an established practice in most schools. As a result, many principals and SMTs likely have not delivered or received instructional coaching. Consequently, partners often need to be responsible for instructional coaching at first. However, from the start, your goal should be to train SMT members to be instructional coaches. This requires:

- Training the SMT in fundamental instructional coaching skills.
- Modelling and demonstrating instructional coaching practices.
- Creating opportunities for SMT members to practise and be observed during coaching.

Once an SMT member is confident in their coaching abilities, they can then coach educators independently. A school principal and experienced SMT members will also coach new SMT members. In small schools where there is not an SMT in place, you should support and develop senior, experienced educators who express interest in coaching to become instructional coaches.

When introducing coaching, focus on building trust with school staff and understanding their needs and concerns before you begin. This can help allay anxieties around coaching. Help the SMT communicate clearly to all staff that coaching is about professional growth, and not about criticising or inspecting practices.

If there is hesitancy surrounding coaching, consider first coaching a group of willing and motivated educators who then communicate the benefits to their peers. Even if only a small number of educators initially respond positively, when they start to demonstrate positive changes in their practices and share these with colleagues, it can build motivation and shift thinking about the benefits of coaching.

To ensure that coaching becomes part of the school routine, coaching sessions should be scheduled in the annual school calendar and SMT members' timetables. Consistent, repeated engagement is far more impactful than one-off sessions. Ideally, you should initially aim for one to two coaching visits per week when coaching an educator. This can be logistically difficult, requiring careful scheduling, but it is more likely to lead to meaningful change as educators embed skills into their practice.

Progress in coaching should always be on the agenda in meetings with the school's principal or head of academics. This helps identify trends and plan for professional development. Individuals learn and move at different paces when they are being coached. A spreadsheet to track coaching and training can help a coach gather and analyse data. This also helps support planning for future coaching.

5.3.1 Initial planning and consultation

Before coaching an educator, communicate clearly that a coach's role is to support and develop, not criticise. This is an important step in laying a foundation for coaching, especially if it is an unfamiliar practice.

A coach and educator should discuss and be clear about the purpose of coaching and intended outcomes before a coach observes the educator in practice. The following questions can guide planning:

- What is the purpose of the coaching session?
 - Is it a follow-up to training?
 - Is it a response to feedback from a previous coaching session?
- What are the anticipated outcomes?
 - How do they relate to the educator's professional development goals?
 - Are they realistic and achievable?
- How will feedback take place?
 - Will it be real-time feedback, or will it take place after observations?

¹⁰¹ For further information and guidelines on instructional coaching, see Booker, L. N., & Russell, J. L. (2022). [Design principles for improving teaching practice with instructional coaching](#). EdResearch for Action, and Keaney, J., Liberty, J., Cohen, S., Buck, M., & Leddy, B. (2018). [A guide to implementing instructional coaching](#). BetterLesson.

5.3.2 Conducting observations

Classroom observations are structured visits where an instructional coach watches an educator teach a lesson or part of a lesson. The coach views teaching practices, learner engagement, and learning outcomes.

During observations, a coach should enter a classroom quietly and position themselves somewhere that does not disturb teaching and learning. Observations help a coach see how an educator has applied the skills or action steps they learnt in training or feedback sessions into practice. The coach can then provide educators with constructive feedback and guidance.

During observations, coaches may also pick up on other trends in classroom practices. These can be noted and, where necessary, be included in future professional development, as Apex High Eersteriver’s principal explains:



“At Apex, instructional leadership lives in the classroom. My SMT and I conduct frequent class observations to stay close to the teaching and learning. Once a week, the SMT meets to analyse what we’ve seen, identify general trends and gaps in practice, and then respond intentionally. These insights directly inform our professional development sessions, ensuring training is targeted, relevant, and impactful. It’s a continuous cycle: observe, analyse, act, improve.”

— Renate van der Westhuizen, founding principal, Apex High Eersteriver

Observations are not only related to teaching and learning. They can include observing activities like:

- The SMT and principal conducting meetings and training.
- Educators setting and moderating assessments.
- Operations staff’s practices.
- SMT members coaching educators.

5.3.3 Providing feedback

Well-delivered, constructive feedback is crucial to positive coaching practices. When feedback is clear and respectful, it helps build educators’ confidence and contributes to stronger classroom practices.

Feedback can be a sit-down conversation after observations, or can occur through real-time feedback where coaches provide quick input during observations. Real-time feedback should be offered quietly and without interrupting teaching and learning¹⁰².

¹⁰² Bambrick-Santoyo, P. (2013). Giving and getting feedback in real time. [Kapppan Online](#).

Feedback must be clear and immediate (or delivered within a day) with a manageable action step for future lessons. As part of the feedback process, a coach may model practices relevant to the feedback to demonstrate how to improve. When a coach next observes an educator, they need to observe this action step to see if the educator has successfully mastered the action step or needs further training and feedback.

See it, Name it, Do it is a useful framework for providing feedback as it supports growth and reflection rather than negative criticism. Use this framework to focus on a specific lesson element, action, or teaching skill that supports improved learning. The following table shows how feedback should be centred on what went well, and on identifying what practices can be built on or improved¹⁰³.

Step	Action
See it (observe and identify)	See the success: Identify and state specific positive actions. See the model: Identify a model of what good looks like for the skill/lesson element. This model may be a recording or a demonstration by the coach. The coach and educator discuss the impact of this model. See the gap: The educator self-reflects on the gap between the model and their practice.
Name it (define an action step)	The educator names an action step based on the discussion during “See it”. This is a measurable, clear, bite-sized step that can be mastered within a short period and implemented at the next opportunity or lesson.
Do it (plan, practise, and follow up)	Plan: The educator internalises the action step and considers what it looks like in their context. Practise: The educator role-plays the action step and receives feedback. Follow up: Set a date for the educator’s next observation.

¹⁰³ For a more comprehensive outline for delivering feedback during coaching, refer to Uncommon Schools n.d. [Giving effective feedback](#).

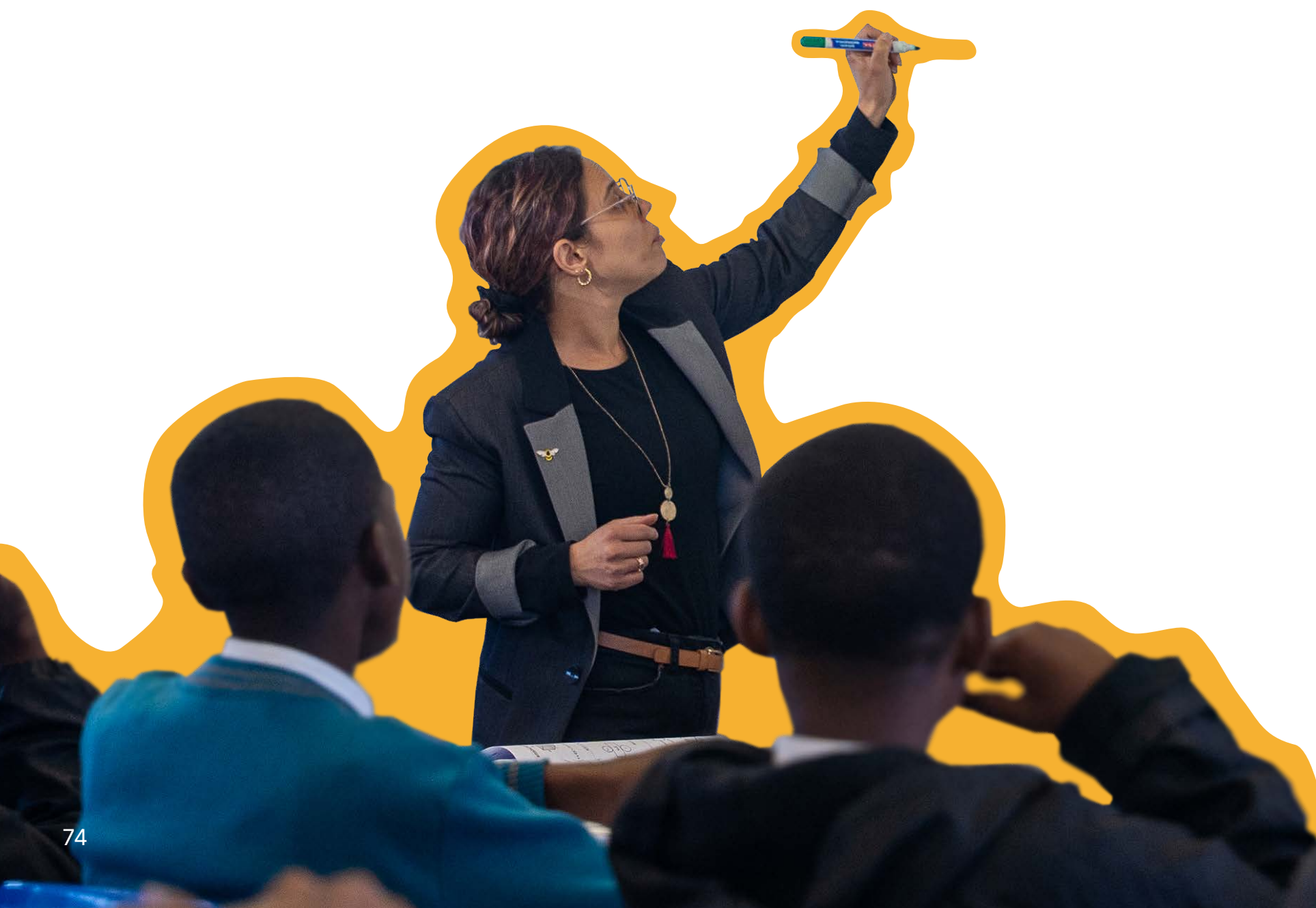
5.4 Supporting newly-appointed educators

Every school is different. When a new educator joins a school, they are expected to adapt to the school's unique ways of doing things. Ideally, the SMT should conduct induction training and provide mentoring for educators when they first start at a school. However, with the pressure that SMTs face, they can struggle to offer comprehensive training and mentoring among their other responsibilities.

Working with the SMT to support recently-appointed educators can help alleviate this pressure. This is especially important when an educator joins a school where there is a partner. New educators may be uncertain about a partner's role and how this affects their own role and responsibilities.

Initially, partners may lead the training and coaching of new educators, but with time, the SMT should assume responsibility. This transfer of responsibility is demonstrated at Apex High Eersteriver. Every educator appointed at Apex High Eersteriver attends a week of induction training that provides a comprehensive introduction to their role and responsibilities. It includes training on DDI, classroom management, routines, and communicating what Apex High stands for and its values.

Previously, Apex Education staff conducted this training, but it is now run by the SMT. In their first year at the school, newly-appointed educators receive weekly coaching from an SMT member and attend weekly professional development training to help them succeed in their roles.



6 Learner support

Learner support refers to the range of services and practices that address the full spectrum of learners' needs. This includes:

- Helping learners who are struggling academically.
- Providing psychosocial support to promote mental health and well-being.
- Offering career guidance to prepare learners for life beyond school.
- Creating safe, nurturing environments where learners can thrive.



“Learner support cannot focus on academics alone. Our approach has to be holistic — supporting children not only academically, but also in terms of their behaviour, socio-economic circumstances, and overall health and wellness. These aspects are deeply interconnected and must be addressed together.”

— Madri Volschenk, learner support specialist, Apex Education

Learner support is critical for meaningful participation in learning, but no-fee schools in South Africa are limited in how they can assist learners who need additional support¹⁰⁴. The DBE has policies, like the [Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support \(SIAS\) Policy](#)¹⁰⁵, in place to support children with barriers to learning. But translating policy into practice is difficult. This is due to schools' resource constraints, high learner-to-educator ratios, and limitations on overburdened staff.

Schools often do not have qualified, specialised learning support educators or counsellors. This means that these responsibilities fall to educators who are not qualified for these roles and have limited time to provide learners with in-depth, individual support. Because of this, even when schools identify that learners need further support, they can struggle to respond comprehensively to the needs of learners.

Partners can therefore play a valuable role in strengthening the support schools provide to learners. These efforts benefit learners' well-being and academic outcomes and can also allow educators to focus on teaching, ultimately creating more nurturing and enabling school environments. The ways in which partners can help schools strengthen learner support can include working directly with individual learners or creating an environment that helps schools implement support offerings themselves.

¹⁰⁴ Deghaye, N., & Wills, G. (2024). *Incomplete resourcing of inclusive education in South Africa: Implications for the reading crisis*. Research on Socio-Economic Policy (RESEP).

¹⁰⁵ Department of Basic Education. (2014). *Policy on screening, identification, assessment and support*.

6.1 How to approach learner support

In public schools, the DBE assigns responsibility for overseeing learner support to a school-based support team (SBST). The SBST is composed of at least one SMT member, who acts as co-ordinator, and other educators. If schools employ a counsellor, social worker, or learner support specialist educator, they should be members of the SBST.

The SBST is responsible for collaborating with educators to identify learners who have barriers to learning and require additional support. It is also responsible for developing in-class and school-based strategies to address these barriers¹⁰⁶. Many South African schools do not have funds to employ counsellors, social workers, or educators who are learner support specialists. This places additional responsibility on SBST members and educators.

Helping schools develop processes and strategies¹⁰⁷ for identifying and addressing learners’ barriers to learning can increase what an SBST can achieve and contribute to schools. It ensures that the learners who need further, specialist support from the district-based support team (DBST)¹⁰⁸ are referred for this support.

When a partner supports a school, whether through professional development, creating documents and tools to simplify referrals and record keeping, or taking on administrative duties, educators can focus on teaching. However, it is important to attend to how your input will impact the school in the long term, as Apex Education’s learner support specialist explains:



“Our goal is to ensure that any support we provide is sustainable. It’s not about stepping in temporarily, but about building the school’s own capacity so that systems continue to function even in our absence. That’s why we focus on streamlining processes and creating simple, practical tools — like structured spreadsheets or Google Forms — that reduce the burden on teachers while still providing valuable feedback, supporting long-term record-keeping, and meeting departmental requirements.”

— Madri Volschenk, learner support specialist, Apex Education

Partners with education expertise should not try to provide support in all areas of learners’ lives and should remain focused on education. Rather than take on too many roles, draw on established networks and engage with potential partners who can provide schools with specialised support. Establishing relationships takes time that school staff often do not have. Assisting schools in identifying potential partners and initiating interactions with these partners can help schools provide learners with specialised support in all areas of their lives. In this sense, the role of the nonprofit can be seen as facilitating learner support.

6.1.1 A framework for learner support

Apex Education’s learner support offerings are discussed here as an example of how a partner can support a school in meeting departmental requirements and supporting learners, without placing undue burden on school staff. Apex Education’s learner support specialist explains that the starting point for strengthening learner support at Apex High Eersteriver was clarifying the departmental processes to be followed to access support for learners:



“The school initially needed support in setting up structures. Before we could offer meaningful assistance, there had to be systems in place to identify learners and refer them to the SBST or DBST. That’s why we worked with the educators to establish these structures — aligning them with government requirements while ensuring they were practical and made sense in the school’s context.”

— Madri Volschenk, learner support specialist, Apex Education



¹⁰⁶ For further details on the SBST’s role and composition see Inclusive Education South Africa. (2018). [IESA factsheet: The role and function of the school based support team](#).
¹⁰⁷ Ramango, S. P., & Naicker, S. R. (2022). Conceptualising a framework for school leaders as they foster an inclusive education culture in schools. [Journal of Education, 86](#), 1–22 is a useful starting point for supporting a school’s SMT to strengthen learner support.
¹⁰⁸ Department of Basic Education. (2024). [The standard operating procedures for the establishment, operational management and capacity building of the district-based support teams \(DBST\)](#).

To do this, Apex Education uses a multi-tiered system of support for learners who need additional academic, social, or emotional support¹⁰⁹. This fits well with the DBE’s SIAS policy steps. Educators can follow these steps to identify individual learners who need low, medium, or high levels of support, and determine how this support should be delivered. The three tiers provide Apex Education and Apex High Eersteriver staff with a structure for identifying what support learners may need and how to provide it.

Tier 3:

Intensive support

Intensive, individualised support for a learner.

Coverage: About 10% of learners

Tier 2:

Targeted programmes and supplemental support

Extra support in small groups or from the SBST.

Coverage: About 25% of learners

Tier 1:

Core instruction and universal support

Delivered by the educator through differentiated and inclusive instruction.

Coverage: 75-100% of learners

Like SIAS, the three-tier framework attends to the needs of the whole child and aims to address all areas of learner well-being.



“A scholar may require a tier 3 intervention for academics — highly intensive support — while needing tier 2 support for behaviour and tier 1 support for socio-emotional needs. The key is that interventions occur across multiple tiers and can change over time. For example, a learner might receive tier 3 academic support for a year, and later transition to tier 2. It’s important to view this as a continuum rather than fixed levels.”

— Madri Volschenk, learner support specialist, Apex Education.

The framework provides a spectrum of support for learners that can be articulated and understood by all school staff and partners. Apex Education has developed and adapted assessments that the school can use to identify the levels of support learners require. Apex Education’s approach ensures that all staff share an articulated, clear process for learner support, and has reduced the potential for delays in recognising learners’ needs.

6.2 Strengthening academic support

The high number of learners in South Africa who have fallen behind in their learning and require intensive academic support to address their knowledge gaps is well-documented¹¹⁰. Working with educators to improve classroom practices can increase the quality of teaching and learning, resulting in fewer learners requiring additional academic support.

However, there will always be learners who will benefit from further, targeted support. This can occur through implementing specific programmes, as Axiom has done, and the hiring of additional learner support specialists to provide more intensive support, as Apex Education has done at Apex High Eersteriver.

6.2.1 Developing foundations for learning

Axiom works in schools where many learners have significant learning backlogs. One of the organisation’s focus areas is ensuring that learners have opportunities to address these learning backlogs and gaps. For this reason, Axiom runs language, mathematics, and science support programmes throughout grades in the schools it supports¹¹¹. It is not financially viable for Axiom to hire qualified educators to administer these programmes. Instead, Axiom employs staff, who are typically

¹⁰⁹ For more detail on implementing a multi-tiered system of support, see Australian Education Research Organisation. (2024). [Introduction to a multi-tiered system of supports](#).

¹¹⁰ Christie, P. (Ed.). (2022). [Perspectives on learning backlogs in South African schooling](#). Zenex Foundation.

¹¹¹ Further information on these programmes can be found on Axiom’s website: www.axiumeducation.org

community members but not qualified educators, through the SEF¹¹² to facilitate academic support programmes. More senior staff, who are employed directly by Axiom, support the facilitators.

One of the main reasons that many learners struggle throughout school is that they lack foundational literacy and numeracy skills. While Axiom staff support learners across primary and high school, they focus on ensuring that primary school learners develop the foundational skills necessary for learning as they move to higher grades. This takes the form of home language isiXhosa literacy support in Grades R to 3, and numeracy support in Grades 4 to 6.

Axiom staff have two timetabled one-hour periods per week in foundation phase classes designated for a literacy catch-up programme, typically scheduled during group guided reading periods. This is to help consolidate learners' literacy skills before they move to Grade 4, where they face the challenge of learning in English, a language unfamiliar to most learners. Axiom staff employed through the SEF deliver tailored small-group instruction to help children read for meaning by the end of Grade 3 using the [Teaching at the Right Level](#) (TaRL) methodology that meets learners at their reading levels. Facilitators are trained in TaRL methodology and job readiness skills to strengthen their employability. This programme addresses critical and interconnected national and Eastern Cape challenges: illiteracy, youth unemployment, and rural educator shortages.

Some facilitators have chosen to pursue teaching qualifications as a result of their work with Axiom, helping to address the educator shortages facing South Africa in rural areas. Additionally, the employment of community members has resulted in stronger school-community links and increased support for Axiom's work.

6.2.2 Academic support for high school learners

When learners enter Apex High Eersteriver in Grade 8, they often have learning gaps that need to be addressed before they can grasp grade-level content. Apex High places a strong focus on providing support for Grade 8 learners to help close learning gaps they bring with them from primary school.

As a starting point for this, when Grade 7 learners are accepted, they write a baseline assessment, then attend 10 maths and language workshop sessions, and write a post-test. This means that when learners start in Grade 8, the school can provide additional academic support from the start of their high school career. The baseline assessments enable classroom educators to identify learning gaps and plan lessons accordingly.

If a partner has available financial resources, employing learning support educators or other academic support staff allows learners to access additional learning support. Apex Education has adopted this approach. It employs two learner support specialists and a remedial maths educator at Apex High Eersteriver. These educators provide mathematics and literacy support to learners who need intensive assistance.

¹¹² SEF is a nine-month government employment stimulus programme that provides employment opportunities in community-based initiatives. www.socialemloymentfund.co.za

Apex Education's learner support specialists assist the school in designing and conducting diagnostic screening tools that help educators identify how they can best help learners who need additional support. Educators at the school take responsibility for providing extra lessons for learners. These lessons happen after school, and Grade 12 learners requiring further academic support have lessons during school holidays.

6.2.3 Scheduling academic support

Many schools in South Africa provide extra lessons for learners, especially Grade 12s, to help close learners' gaps in knowledge. Lessons take place before or after school, on Saturdays, or during school holidays.

When planning for extra lessons, ensure that educators and learners can still access safe transport and that learners receive meals if necessary. While attendance at extra lessons and longer school days can benefit learners, what matters most is that learners are engaged and learning when they are in class. This can require flexibility and rethinking schedules.

For example, Apex High Eersteriver used to have longer school days. However, through tracking learner data, it became apparent that the extra hours spent at school did not necessarily amount to learners mastering content, and learners struggled to manage the extended day. The school responded to this by shifting the focus to more effective teaching methods and using time more productively, which led to improved academic results.

6.3 Providing psychosocial support

When learners are healthy and have access to necessary psychosocial support and nutrition, they are better positioned to engage in learning.

Because social and academic well-being are interconnected, it is important that teaching and non-teaching staff work together to support a child. Being able to refer learners to counsellors benefits educators' well-being and allows them to remain focused on teaching. In most no-fee schools, there is no school counsellor, and educators struggle to refer learners to departmental social workers who are overburdened and serve multiple schools.

There is no mandated ratio for social workers to learners in public schools. School social workers typically serve multiple schools within a district, with one social worker responsible for 23,000 learners on average¹¹³. This means they are unable to support all learners requiring professional psychosocial support, which places educators under pressure to fulfil this role despite not being trained for it.

¹¹³ Jiang, H. Z. (2023, September 13). South African children lack psychosocial support. [Health-E News](#).

There is a qualified school counsellor in all Cape Town schools that Common Good works in. They are either employed directly by Common Good or through the NGO [Community Keepers](#)¹¹⁴. Community Keepers is an NGO that works in 89 schools across four provinces. It provides on-site counselling support for learners and focuses on helping schools to be safe spaces where all learners can thrive.

Apex Education and Axiom have facilitated partnerships with Community Keepers and schools in which they work to help learners access psychosocial support. Counsellors attend SBST meetings and offer group and parent sessions, if requested. School counsellors, whether employed directly by a partner or through another organisation, are also involved in major disciplinary proceedings, recognising that behavioural problems are often linked to learners' psychosocial well-being.

6.4 Providing career guidance

Helping Grade 9 learners with subject choices and helping Grade 11 and 12 learners prepare for life after school are crucial in laying a platform for future success. But schools often do not have the staff capacity to provide the necessary guidance. Providing learners with access to such guidance can have a significant positive impact on their future opportunities. This aspect of learner support is central to Apex Education and Axiom's offerings for high school learners.

Apex High Eersteriver's career centre

Apex Education employs a career counsellor and an administrator who run a careers centre at Apex High Eersteriver. The centre provides Grade 9 learners with subject choice guidance and coordinates activities for Grade 11 and 12 learners to help them transition successfully to life beyond school. This includes:

- Organising job shadowing and industry exposure.
- Organising attendance at career expos and university open days.
- Psychometric testing.
- Assistance with writing CVs.
- Helping learners with applications for tertiary education.

The centre also has a skills development programme where it partners with organisations such as Community Women in Action to offer learners training in digital literacy, coding, practical vocational skills, and obtaining driver's licences, among other areas. These activities increase opportunities for tertiary education and employment.

Axiom's pathways programme

Axiom's long-term vision is that every rural learner leaves school with purpose, agency, and options. One of their core programme offerings is helping high school learners navigate the journey from school to life beyond matric. High school learners, especially in rural areas, often lack exposure to post-school opportunities and career guidance.

The programme employs a university graduate with experience in careers counselling and an administrative officer at each high school with which Axiom partners. Career counsellors help learners with subject choices for Grade 10, and provide one-on-one consultations for Grade 11 and 12 learners in preparation for leaving school. The programme guides learners and their parents or guardians through tertiary applications, funding opportunities, and career decision-making.

The application process for further education can be complex and laborious, and learners do not always have access to relevant information or the internet. Providing learners with this support and advice on the programmes they are able to apply for increases their chances of accessing further education.

Axiom's in-house tracking system also helps monitor progress and tailor support. Together with the SMT, Axiom's pathways team provides feedback to learners so that they know whether they are on track to meet targets for tertiary education placement.

Axiom also supports learners entering tertiary education with the transition. National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) funding only comes through after students register, and families are not able to bear the costs of accommodation, food, and transport during this time. Therefore, where necessary, Axiom will help students access funding and connect them with alumni to help support their transition between school and tertiary education.

Importantly, the programme is not limited to academic pathways. It introduces learners to a range of options, including vocational training, internships, and entering the workforce immediately after school. Whether through assisting learners in accessing finance and bursaries, alumni support networks, or partnerships with local businesses, the programme helps equip learners with the tools, information, and confidence they need when they leave school.

¹¹⁴ www.communitykeepers.org

7 Conclusion

The school improvement work done by Apex Education, Axiom, Common Good, and Education Ally has required careful preparation, deep understanding, and long-term perspective, prioritising sustainable change over quick fixes.

Schools improve when there is a clear vision for their future, with all those involved dedicated to learning, reflecting, and adapting. Every school has its own strengths and improvement priorities, and therefore, the ways in which you approach improvement in individual schools will differ. But the principles of school improvement remain consistent. The frameworks, tools, and examples shared in this guide provide a practical resource that can be adapted to different contexts for nonprofits, schools, communities, and education department officials.

School improvement is demanding and complex. However, it is also one of the most impactful ways to strengthen learning and provide children in South Africa with access to an education that prepares them for success beyond school. As you take on this difficult but rewarding work, we hope that this publication serves as a guide for practical efforts to strengthen leadership, teaching, and learning in South African schools and to create learning environments that open up new possibilities for learners.



8 References

- Apex Education. (2024). [Halving the cost of high-quality schools: A blueprint for blended learning in South Africa](#).
- Apex High Eersteriver. (n.d.). [Code of conduct](#).
- Ark Teacher Training. (2023). [Guiding principles: The six pillars of Ark schools](#).
- Australian Council for Educational Research. (2023). [School improvement tool](#).
- Australian Education Research Organisation. (2024). [Introduction to a multi-tiered system of supports](#).
- Axiom Education. (2025). [Public School Partnerships: A guide to supporting & improving schools](#). DGMT.
- Bambrick-Santoyo, P. (2013). Giving and getting feedback in real time. [Kappan Online](#).
- Bambrick-Santoyo, P. (2016). *Get better faster: A 90-day plan for developing new teachers*. Jossey-Bass.
- Bambrick-Santoyo, P. (2018). *Leverage leadership 2.0: A practical guide to building exceptional schools*. Jossey-Bass.
- Bambrick-Santoyo, P. (2019). *Driven by data 2.0: A practical guide to improve instruction* (Second edition). Jossey-Bass.
- Barth, R. (2013). Culture in question. In M. Grogan (Ed.), *The Jossey-Bass reader on educational leadership*. (3rd ed., pp. 238–248). Jossey-Bass.
- Bennett, T. (2017). [Creating a culture: How school leaders can optimise behaviour](#). Department for Education.
- Booker, L. N., & Russell, J. L. (2022). [Design principles for improving teaching practice with instructional coaching](#). EdResearch for Action.
- Bush, T. (2013). Instructional leadership and leadership for learning: Global and South African perspectives. [Education as Change, 17](#) (Supplement 1), S5–S20.
- Bush, T., & Glover, D. (2016). School leadership and management in South Africa: Findings from a systematic literature review. [International Journal of Educational Management, 30](#) (2), 211–231. [www.nottingham-repository.worktribe.com](#)
- Centre for the Advancement of Science and Mathematics Education. (2023). [ICTs in early-grade mathematics education in South Africa: A learning brief](#). Zenex Foundation.
- Chapman, C., & Sammons, P. (2013). [School self-evaluation for school improvement: What works and why?](#) CfBT Education Trust.
- Christie, P. (Ed.). (2022). [Perspectives on learning backlogs in South African schooling](#). Zenex Foundation.
- Cornett, J., & Knight, J. (2009). Research on coaching. In J. Knight (Ed.), *Coaching: Approaches & perspectives learning*. (pp. 192–216). Corwin Press.
- Cox, S., & Zhou, J. (2019). [How high expectations and engagement in primary school drive student](#). Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, New South Wales Government.
- Deal, T., & Peterson, K. (2016). *Shaping school culture* (3rd ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- Deghaye, N., & Wills, G. (2024). [Incomplete resourcing of inclusive education in South Africa: Implications for the reading crisis](#). Research on Socio-Economic Policy (RESEP).
- Department of Basic Education. (n.d. -a). [Guide to school self-evaluation](#).
- Department of Basic Education (n.d. -b) [Development of school improvement plans](#).
- Department of Basic Education. (n.d. -c). [Quality management system \(QMS\)—development of a work plan for principals](#).
- Department of Basic Education. (n.d. -d) [QMS comprehensive school resources package](#).
- Department of Basic Education. (2014). [Policy on screening, identification, assessment and support](#).
- Department of Basic Education. (2022). [Personnel administrative measures \(PAM\)](#).

Department of Basic Education. (2024). [*The standard operating procedures for the establishment, operational management and capacity building of the district-based support teams \(DBST\)*](#).

Department of Education. (2006). [*Post provisioning: Conceptual framework, analysis of the data and way forward*](#).

Department of Education and Training, State of Victoria. (2020). [*High impact teaching strategies*](#).

Diesel, D. (2024). [*How to create a school improvement plan. Schools That Lead*](#).

DGMT. (2023a). [*A guide to monitoring and evaluation for NGOs*](#).

DGMT. (2023b). Social Employment Fund (SEF) partnership: Partnering to bring the SEF to communities across South Africa. [*Hands-on: Experience Learning, 25*](#).

DGMT. (2025). Setting up public school partnerships in the Northern Cape. [*Hands-on: Experience Learning, 29*](#).

Education Endowment Fund. (2019). [*Using digital technology to improve learning: Guidance report*](#).

Education Service Center Region 13. (n.d.). [*The teacher toolkit*](#).

Edufundi. (2021). [*Teach like a champion technique series*](#). YouTube.

Georgia Leadership Institute for School Improvement. (2014). [*Shaping a vision of academic success for all students*](#).

Gruenert, S., & Whitaker, T. (2015). *School culture rewired: How to define, assess, and transform it*. ASCD.

Hofmeyr, J. (2019). [*Literature review of coaching in education: From 'knowing to doing'*](#). Zenex Foundation.

Hou, Y., Cui, Y., & Zhang, D. (2019). Impact of instructional leadership on high school student academic achievement in China. [*Asia Pacific Education Review, 20*](#)(4), 543–558.

Huston, K. (2025). [*Public employment programmes \(PEPs\) and foundation phase literacy: A rapid scan of PEP design and compatibility*](#). Binding Constraints Lab.

Inclusive Education South Africa. (2018). [*IESA factsheet: The role and function of the school based support team*](#).

James, S. (2025). Vision and mission of school statements: A practical guide with examples. [*Education Walkthrough*](#).

Jiang, H. Z. (2023, September 13). South African children lack psychosocial support. [*Health-E News*](#).

Kanjee, A., Roberts, N., Sadeck, O., & Ramollo, J. (2022). Entrenching performativity or enhancing pedagogy: Addressing the challenge of assessment policy and practice. [*Journal of Education, 87*](#).

Keaney, J., Liberty, J., Cohen, S., Buck, M., & Leddy, B. (2018). [*A guide to implementing instructional coaching*](#). BetterLesson.

Koh, G. A., Askeff-Williams, H., & Barr, S. (2023). Sustaining school improvement initiatives: Advice from educational leaders. [*School Effectiveness and School Improvement, 34*](#)(3), 298–330.

Lemov, D. (2015). *Teach like a champion 2.0: 62 techniques that put students on the path to college* (2nd ed.). Jossey-Bass.

Mestry, R. (2017). Empowering principals to lead and manage public schools effectively in the 21st century. [*South African Journal of Education, 37*](#)(1), Article 1334.

Moses, E. (2024). [*Principal retention and attrition trends in South Africa: Insights from the PERSAL data*](#). Research on Socio-Economic Policy (RESEP).

Naidoo, P. (2019). Perceptions of teachers and school management teams of the leadership roles of public school principals. [*South African Journal of Education, 39*](#)(2), Article no. 1534.

NEEDU. (2017). [*Policy brief 1: Use of teaching time*](#).

Peddie, B., Kelly, M., Greengard, T., Whiting, C., & Richardson, S. (2024). [*Foundational classroom management resources handbook*](#). Australian Education Research Organisation.

Queensland Department of Education. (2022). [*Instructional leadership—leading the teaching and learning*](#). Education Improvement Research Centre.

Ramango, S. P., & Naicker, S. R. (2022). Conceptualising a framework for school leaders as they foster an inclusive education culture in schools. [*Journal of Education, 86*](#), 1–22.

Republic of South Africa. 1996. [*South African Schools Act \(Act no. 84 of 1996\)*](#).

Sanchez, J., & Watson, J. (2021). Effective instructional leadership practices in high performing elementary schools. [*Journal of School Administration Research and Development, 6*](#)(2), 60–70.

Schirmer, S., & Visser, R. (2023). [*The silent crisis: Time to fix South Africa's schools*](#). The Centre for Development.

Sephton, S. (2017). Post provisioning. In F. Veriava (Ed.), [*Basic Education Rights Handbook*](#). SECTION27.

Sibanda, J. (2017). Understanding distributed leadership in South African schools: Challenges and prospects. [*Issues in Educational Research, 27*](#)(3), 567–581.

Taylor, N. (2019). Inequalities in teacher knowledge in South Africa. In N. Spaul & J. D. Jansen (Eds.), *South African schooling: The enigma of inequality: A study of the present situation and future possibilities*. (pp. 263–282). Springer International Publishing.

The Center on School Turnaround. (2017). [*Four domains for rapid school improvement: A systems framework*](#). WestEd.

The Center on School Turnaround. (2018). [*Shifting school culture to spark rapid improvement*](#).

The HEAD Foundation. (2021). [*Fostering a positive school culture in the new normal*](#).

UChicago Impact. (2025). [*5Essentials*](#).

Uncommon Schools n.d. [*Giving effective feedback*](#).

UNICEF. (2021). [*Effectiveness of digital learning solutions to improve educational outcomes*](#).



9 Further reading

This list of resources has been compiled for nonprofits and schools interested in further investigating school improvement practices and research.

Most of these resources have been produced outside of South Africa. Yet, the principles underpinning school improvement are globally consistent. Nonprofits and schools consulting these resources should be mindful of the differences in context and adapt as necessary to their specific schools.

9.1 School improvement frameworks

Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation. (2014). [School improvement frameworks: The evidence base](#). NSW Department of Education.

Eisenschmidt, E., & Vanari, K. (2025). How to unpack the black box of school culture—A conceptual framework for school improvement in Estonia. [Leadership and Policy in Schools](#).

Ontario Ministry of Education. (2013). [School effectiveness framework: A support for school improvement and success](#).

The Center on School Turnaround. (2017). [Four domains for rapid school improvement: A systems framework](#). WestEd.

UChicago Impact. (n.d.). [The 5Essentials framework](#).

9.2 School improvement planning

Aldridge, J. M., & McLure, F. I. (2024). Preparing schools for educational change: Barriers and supports – A systematic literature review. [Leadership and Policy in Schools, 23](#)(3), 486–511.

Australian Council for Educational Research. (2023). [School improvement tool](#).

Chapman, C., & Sammons, P. (2013). [School self-evaluation for school improvement: What works and why?](#)

Diesel, D. (2024). [How to create a school improvement plan](#).

James, S. (2024). Top strategies for creating an effective school improvement plan. [Education Walkthrough](#).

Koh, G. A., Askill-Williams, H., & Barr, S. (2023). Sustaining school improvement initiatives: Advice from educational leaders. [School Effectiveness and School Improvement, 33](#)(3), 298–330.

NEEDU. (2018). [It's time to implement SIP](#).

Sharples, J., Eaton, J., & Boughelaf, J. (2024). [A school's guide to implementation](#). Education Endowment Fund.

9.3 School culture

Australian Education Research Organisation. (2023). [High expectations for student behaviour: Their role in classroom management](#).

Baars, S., Shaw, B., Mulcahy, E., & Menzies, L. (2018). [School culture and practice: Supporting disadvantaged pupils](#).

Bennett, T. (2017). [Creating a culture: How school leaders can optimise behaviour](#). Department for Education, UK.

Cox, S. (2020). [Supporting high academic expectations](#). Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, New South Wales Government.

Cox, S., & Zhou, J. (2019). [How high expectations and engagement in primary school drive student learning](#). Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, New South Wales Government.

Deal, T., & Peterson, K. (2016). [Shaping school culture](#) (3rd ed.). Jossey-Bass.

Georgia Leadership Institute for School Improvement. (2014). [Shaping a vision of academic success for all students](#).

Gruenert, S., & Whitaker, T. (2015). [School culture rewired: How to define, assess, and transform it](#). ASCD.

Gruenert, S., & Whitaker, T. (2017). [School culture recharged: Strategies to energize your staff and culture](#). ASCD.

James, S. (2025). Vision and mission of school statements: A practical guide with examples. [Education Walkthrough](#).

National Education Collaboration Trust (NECT). (2016). [School culture: Building a positive school culture \(Management and Leadership Series\)](#). [www.natu.org.za](#) and [www.natu.org.za](#).

Raudys, J. (2018). [11 real ways to build a positive school culture](#).

The Center on School Turnaround. (2018). [Shifting school culture to spark rapid improvement](#).

The HEAD Foundation. (2021). [Fostering a positive school culture in the new normal](#).

Western Cape Education Department. (2019). [Let's talk values: Values conversations in schools](#).

9.4 Leadership

Bambrick-Santoyo, P. (2012). [Leverage leadership: A practical guide to building exceptional schools](#). Jossey-Bass.

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

Instructional Leadership Institute. (n.d.). Resource hub. [www.ili.education](#)

Leithwood, K., Day, C., Sammons, P., Harris, A., & Hopkins, D. (2006). [Seven strong claims about successful school leadership](#). National College for School Leadership.

Leithwood, K., Harris, A., & Hopkins, D. (2020). [Seven strong claims about successful school leadership revisited](#). School leadership & management, 40(1), 5–22.

NEEDU. (2018). [Habits of highly effective instructional and facilitative leaders](#).

Queensland Department of Education. (2022). [Instructional leadership—leading the teaching and learning](#). Education Improvement Research Centre.

9.5 School management

Department of Basic Education. (n.d.). [Frequently asked questions: Quality management system \(QMS\)](#).
Department of Basic Education. (n.d.). [QMS comprehensive school resource pack](#).
Department of Basic Education. (n.d.). [QMS: School training kit \(principals\)](#).
Department of Basic Education. (n.d.). [Quality management system \(QMS\): Completing the appraisal instrument for principals](#).
Department of Basic Education. (n.d.). [Quality management system \(QMS\): Development of a work plan for principals](#).

9.6 Education and instructional change

Bambrick-Santoyo, P. (2016). *Get better faster: A 90-day plan for developing new teachers*. Jossey-Bass.
Bambrick-Santoyo, P. (2019). *Driven by data 2.0: A practical guide to improve instruction* (Second edition). Jossey-Bass.
Department of Education and Training, State of Victoria. (2020). [High impact teaching strategies](#).
Education Service Center Region 13. (n.d.). [The teacher toolkit](#).
Edufundi. (2021). [Teach like a champion technique series](#). YouTube.
Lemov, D. (2015). *Teach like a champion 2.0: 62 techniques that put students on the path to college* (Second edition). Jossey-Bass.
Peddie, B., Kelly, M., Greengard, T., Whiting, C., & Richardson, S. (2024). [Foundational classroom management resources handbook](#). Australian Education Research Organisation.

9.7 Digital learning

Apex Education. (2024). [Halving the cost of high-quality schools: A blueprint for blended learning in South Africa](#).
Centre for the Advancement of Science and Mathematics Education. (2023). [ICTs in early-grade mathematics education in South Africa: A learning brief](#). Zenex Foundation.
DGMT. (2023). [Blended learning: When partnerships spark innovation](#). Hands-on: Experience Learning, 25.
Education Endowment Fund. (2019). [Using digital technology to improve learning: Guidance report](#).
Normén-Smith, J., van Cappelle, F., Atis, E., & Ghobashy, D. (2024). [Six pillars for the digital transformation of education: A common framework](#). UNESCO.

9.8 Professional development

Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership. (2017). [Enabling high quality professional learning: A practical guide for leaders](#).
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.
Collin, J., & Smith, E. (2021). [Effective professional development](#). Education Endowment Fund.
Education Improvement Research Centre. (2021). [Classroom coaching that makes a difference](#).
Fletcher-Wood, H., & Taevere, A. (2022). [Instructional coaching – why it matters, and how to make it matter](#). British Council.
Hofmeyr, J. (2019). [Literature review of coaching in education: From ‘knowing to doing.’](#) Zenex Foundation.
Knight, J. (2009). *Instructional coaching: A partnership approach to improving instruction*. Corwin Press.
Lofthouse, R., Leat, D., & Towler, C. (2010). [Coaching for teaching and learning: A practical guide for schools](#). CfBT Education Trust.
Mitchell, R., Ayinselya, R. A., Barrett, A. M., Cortez Ochoa, A. A., David, O., Imaniriho, D., Nwako, Z. A., Reda, N. W., & Singh, M. (2024). [Teacher professional development in Africa](#). Centre for Comparative and International Research in Education (CIRE).
NEEDU. (2018). [Effective school-based professional development for teachers](#).
The K20 Center for Educational and Community Renewal. (2018). [Instructional coaching: A review of the literature](#). The K20 Center, University of Oklahoma.
Uncommon Schools n.d. [Giving effective feedback](#).



publicschoolpartnerships.co.za

Produced by DGMT / Cape Town / February 2026

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 R200 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