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**The District Partnership Project Baseline Study**

**Summary of findings and proposed capacity building programme**

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## The District Partnership Project

The District Partnership Project (DPP) aims to develop the capacity of district officials in 5 districts in Mpumalanga (2), KwaZulu/Natal (1) and Eastern Cape (2) to implement the School Support and Development Model (SSDM) in order to:

- Sustain the improvements achieved in existing project schools
- Enable similar improvements in clusters of new schools

## Progress in the first 6 months

The set-up and baseline study phases of the project have been completed on schedule in spite of a great deal of instability at both district and provincial levels - particularly in the Eastern Cape and Mpumalanga.

Activities so far have included:

- **Setting up the project**
  - Secured the support of the Directors of five districts to implement the project
  - Negotiated a broad plan to work in partnership with officials over 3 years to implement the SSDM
  - Negotiated performance agreements for the first year of the project with each district
  - Identified 'designated' district officials to participate in the project
- **Establishing working relations**
  - Explained the SSDP and how it enabled schools to implement key policy requirements and achieve improved functionality and learner results
  - Outlined the roles, responsibilities and expectations of the partners in the SSDP
  - Outlined the support the DPP can offer District Officials
  - Explained how Project Managers and Officials would need to be prepared to work differently to enable schools to implement the SSDP
  - Discussed the support that officials think they need
- **Conducting a baseline study that included:**
  - Extensive observation of officials at work including individual and focus group interviews and detailed field notes

- Circuit Managers and Curriculum Advisors completing questionnaires
- **The observation of officials at work included:**
  - A parliamentary portfolio committee inquiry into poor performance in a district and its schools
  - District management meetings
  - District office visits
  - Briefing meetings for principals
  - Briefing meetings for SMTs
  - CAPS training workshops
  - School monitoring visits
- **Orientation of officials to new ways of working included**
  - Initial orientation to:**
    - The SSDP and how it focuses on enabling schools to do what they are expected to do
    - The impact of the SSDP on school functionality, teaching practices and learner results
    - How the systematic use of LTSMs combined with diagnostic assessment and detailed reflective feedback on trends in learner results contributed towards improved teaching and learner results
    - The official roles and responsibilities of CMs and CAs
    - The new (CAPS) curriculum
  - Joint school support visits to expose them to how the SSDP project managers:**
    - Engage with school personnel
    - Conduct CAPS orientation and training workshops
    - Provide diagnostic feedback on Literacy and Numeracy results and identify focus areas for teaching attention across the curriculum
    - Conduct training in how to develop study skills

- Provide subject-specific mathematics capacity building
- Provide classroom-based monitoring and support
- Encourage and demonstrate the optimal use of available LTSMs

## **The baseline study: summary of findings**

### **District functionality has deteriorated since 2008**

The main trends emerging from this baseline study suggest that the situation in district offices has deteriorated since 2008.

To recap briefly, in 2008 the SSDP's baseline study revealed that District Support to the project schools was:

- Uncoordinated
- Under-staffed
- Under-resourced
- Inappropriate - emphasizing compliance at the expense of support

It also revealed that many officials:

- Did not have a clear sense of their roles and responsibilities
- Had not received meaningful orientation to the policies they are required to oversee, and were either ignorant of them, or unfamiliar with them
- Had not received practical training in how to enable schools to implementation policy guidelines
- Appeared to lack the sense of personal or group agency necessary to take responsibility for informing themselves about these matters and equipping themselves to become the change agents they could and should be

### **Observations: Day-to-day district realities**

The following overview of the situation in the 5 districts between January and July 2012 provides insights into the nature of day-to-day realities in these districts and some of the reasons for them.

#### **Unhelpful relations between national, province and district**

- There is no evidence of consultation, collaboration or coordination between the three levels of the system.

- Relations between them tend to be more autocratic, adversarial and undermining than mediating, supportive or enabling.
- National and provincial departments generally appear to relate to districts in three ways:
  - Laissez-faire: paying no meaningful attention to monitoring progress
  - Authoritarian: sending de-contextualized directives requiring unquestioning and immediate action
  - Punitive: conducting heavy-handed, authoritarian interventions when things are discovered to have gone wrong

- The following provide illustrative examples:

- One district that has been dysfunctional for many years was suddenly placed under provincial administration during the second term of this year. This happened without prior discussions about addressing problems, or increased monitoring of or support for any of its functions.

The non-consultative, authoritarian manner in which this was done has been met with passive resistance from district officials, which has in turn led to district functions grinding to an almost complete standstill.

- Similarly, another equally dysfunctional district received an inquisition-style visit from a 12-member Parliamentary Portfolio Committee travelling with bodyguards in a convoy of luxury black cars flashing blue lights. The committee conducted a number of intimidating hearings during which representatives from the province, district, circuits, teacher unions and schools were required to explain the district's poor learner results.

The impact of these intimidating inquisitions was fear and discouragement that led to intensified blaming, bickering and aggressive criticism between province, district and schools.

- Directives from the national or provincial department are, more often than not, delivered unexpectedly, very late, and without any prior contextualizing briefing. They seldom give any consideration to existing district activities and are experienced as de-contextualized, often meaningless and generally disruptive and frustrating.

The observed impact of these kinds of directives is that:

- Officials are frequently called back to the district office for urgent instructions that require them to put what they are doing on hold, and to divert their attention to conducting provincial or national business.
  - This generally means all available officials rush to schools to conduct policing, monitoring or data gathering exercises; or to deliver directives announcing immediate changes to some administrative procedure, or to the format for recording some data that has to be re-recorded and re-submitted.
  - Usually this results in resentment and the disruption of day-to-day activities in all schools for as long as it takes to do what is required, while the learners wait unsupervised for their teachers to return to their classrooms.
- In addition, districts are often not informed about provincial and national notices sent directly to schools. This means they are often unaware of and uninformed about additional administrative activities distracting schools, and creates the impression that they are incompetent.
  - Overall, rather than perceiving themselves as fulfilling a meaningful function as the public face of the Department of Education, district officials feel undermined and disrespected; and that they are the DoE's 'policemen, postmen and messengers who are generally the bearers of bad news'.

### **Posts, politics and budgets**

- It would seem that few senior appointments are made on merit or with a view to 'fit for purpose'. Instead, party-political, teacher union and other political agendas appear to have prioritized jostling for higher office over effective schooling.
- According to most district officials, SADTU is running the Eastern Cape Education Department and holding the Mpumalanga Department to ransom. In both provinces it appears intent on ensuring that its candidates are appointed to as many senior provincial and district positions as possible, and uses a variety of strategies including the on-going contestation of appointments to ensure that no other candidates can be appointed.
- As a result, many senior management positions are vacant or occupied by 'acting' or 'rotating' officials who 'have no authority to exercise their mandates' - as has been the case since 2008. For example: 3 districts have had acting or 'absent' directors for several years. One of these has had 4 acting directors in as many years.
- Many other district positions have been frozen due to budget constraints or put on hold due to political contestation

- As a result many positions - particularly curriculum advisor posts - have been vacant since 2008
- In addition, many senior managers are based in regional or head offices because of tensions in the district that make it too risky to work from their own offices.
- Scenarios like the above have led to the 'normalization' of 'permanently vacant posts', severe under staffing and weak management in most districts; and the almost complete absence of management functions in 2.

### **Teacher unions: good cop + bad cop = spoiling tactics**

In addition to the competition for senior education positions already discussed, teacher unions also appear to be adopting different roles for different occasions. The overall impact however, appears to be confusion and paralysis at national, provincial and district levels.

On the one hand:

- Union attitudes and activities are perceived by education officials as self-serving, disruptive, dismissive, defiant and undermining

On the other, Unions have also played an important advocacy role in, for example:

- Challenging provincial departments about their over-emphasis on limited and rigid compliance procedures at the expense of necessary enabling support
- Reminding provincial and district officials of their mandated roles and responsibilities negotiated and agreed in the ELRC; and of the Batho Pele Principles of 'PEOPLE FIRST'
- Pointing out that district officials do not have the competencies to provide adequate curriculum training
- Attempting to take responsibility for CAPS training (but unfortunately demonstrating that they also do not have the competencies to provide adequate curriculum training - see more about CAPS training below)

### **Cars, laptops and little else**

In terms of the resources that district officials need in order to do their jobs, there appear to be two disparate systems operating at the level of provinces and districts. On the one hand:

- Many officials drive top-of-the-range vehicles and have the use of laptops and cell phones, suggesting that there are substantial financial resources available to support their work.

On the other hand:

- For many other officials, the limited number of available pool vehicles makes visiting schools a significant challenge.
  - No available vehicle simply means: no school visits.
  - One available vehicle means: several officials share the vehicle and waste significant amounts of time travelling to different schools and waiting for each other to conduct their individual business.
- Most of the district and circuit offices are as poorly, or even more poorly resourced than the schools they are supposed to support. Few officials have offices or administrative support; few offices have even the most basic office resources such as telephones, computers and stationery; and few district and circuit offices have more than 1 photocopy machine.

### **Absence of support from the province**

This is a major issue for all officials in all 5 districts. The following is a summary of just some of the key issues observed.

#### **Little or no induction or training**

While there are nationally and provincially driven training initiatives from time to time, there is no evidence of a coordinated induction and training programme aimed at establishing and maintaining minimum standards across all officials.

#### **No professional development**

What professional development support there was in the past has been replaced by ad hoc meetings called at short notice to issue directives without practical training to support implementation.

#### **Confusion around roles and responsibilities**

There is widespread confusion among district officials about roles and responsibilities in general, with very few officials aware of, or familiar with their own job descriptions.

In the case of circuit managers and curriculum advisors, there is a great deal of confusion about and tension around who is accountable for what aspects of curriculum implementation. This appears to be compounded by the perceptions of both CMs and CAs, that provincial departments hold circuit managers accountable for curriculum implementation.

#### **Provincial officials preoccupied by ineffective administrative activities**

District officials perceive provincial officials to be distant, disinterested, officious and preoccupied with ineffective administrative tasks.

**Frustration at disdain and inefficiency**

There are high levels of frustration about how disdainful and inefficient provincial officials are. From the district perspective, the modus operandi of provincial officials is 'hurry up and wait to waste more time fixing our mistakes'.

It is standard practice to expect reports, data and requisitions submitted on time for tight provincial deadlines, to be:

- Lost or misplaced and have to be re-submitted
- Not responded to unless followed up several times
- Acted on only after extended delays. (According to district officials and school principals, delays of a year or more are the norm rather than the exception)
- Followed by late, incomplete and incorrect deliveries/responses

**Poor communication, poor work ethic, poor performance**

Poor communication systems and procedures appear to be generally accepted as normal and are a major challenge at every level of the system. These appear to combine to:

- Undermine coherent planning and the possibility of collaboration
- Hinder meaningful monitoring and the development of common understandings of progress and challenges in the province, district or schools
- Contribute towards the general acceptance of feeling isolated from and ignorant about national, provincial and district plans and goals
- Undermine a sense of vision and purpose
- Support low levels of accountability
- Reinforce low expectations and erode good work ethics
- Normalize the acceptability of being unproductive

**CAPS training - uneven, unsatisfactory, confusing, even chaotic**

- In spite of much rhetoric and the innovation of involving teacher unions in providing CAPS training - it does not seem that much has been done differently from previous years in the 5 project districts

- Observations confirmed the general opinions of teachers and officials: CAPS training has been as uneven, general, superficial and unsatisfactory as for previous versions of the curriculum
- This year it has also been disrupted (sometimes chaotically) due to contestations between teacher unions, resulting in for example: members of competing unions refusing to attend workshops organized or conducted by another union's members, or 'walking out' on each other's presenters
- As a consequence, it is difficult to establish reliable records of how many of the training workshops have actually been completed, or how many teachers have actually completed the training
- There has also been great unhappiness about the national department giving the responsibility for CAPS training to the unions late in 2011. This is particularly because national had already invested in the training of district officials from early 2011, and they had already trained their colleagues in the latter part of 2011 (albeit via the previously unsuccessful cascade model applied to C2005, the NCS and RNCS)
- As a result, district officials feel betrayed and publicly undermined by the DoE. They are particularly angry about this humiliation because:
  - They do not anticipate that the unions will be able to provide more effective training than they could have
  - This strategy is a public vote of no confidence in their ability to support teachers to implement the curriculum via the training that the national department itself provided for them
  - The strategy has intensified the already entrenched 'stand-off' situation between officials and teachers/unions, further reducing the possibility of teachers allowing them to conduct classroom visits/observations. Some officials fear that, as a result, their functions may become redundant

### **School visits**

Confirm that district officials continue to:

- Focus almost exclusively on paper-based compliance activities
- Neglect the monitoring and practical support necessary to enable meaningful implementation
- Are not clear about their roles and responsibilities

- Require job-specific training and on-the-job support to understand what is required of them and how to do it meaningfully

### **Widespread frustration, de-motivation ineffectiveness and apathy**

Given the realities summarized in this section, it is not surprising to find that most district officials appear to be:

- Under-informed, under-trained, inappropriately utilized and ineffective
- Isolated, under-resourced, frustrated, de-motivated and lacking a sense of agency to do anything about the situation they find themselves in

### **Questionnaire responses: Perceived and observed practices**

As a form of triangulation, 24 Circuit Managers and 114 Curriculum Advisors from the 5 districts responded to a questionnaire that focussed on:

- The support they provide to schools
- The support they receive to do their jobs
- Challenges they face in doing their work
- The kind of support they need in order to do their work more effectively

Their perceptions were compared with observations of day-to-day district realities during the 6-month baseline study to arrive at the following summary of overall trends:

### **Consistencies between perceived and observed practices**

#### **Circuit Managers:**

- Are responsible for a manageable number of schools
- With responsibilities for too many issues
- With too little training and support
- With too few resources
- With too little time to be effective

#### **Curriculum Advisors:**

- Have a clearer, more manageable set of responsibilities
- But are responsible for too many schools
- With too little training and support
- With too few resources
- With too little time to be effective

These and the many other challenges they face, create conditions that lend themselves to short compliance monitoring visits

### **Contradictions between perceived and observed practices**

There are clear contradictions between:

- The kind of support officials believe they are providing, and the positive impact they believe it is having on their schools
- and
- The low levels of functionality; the limited uptake of curriculum change; and the consistently poor learner results in their schools

### **Needs analysis: Identified support needs**

Through feedback and needs analysis workshops, the following needs were identified for CMs and CAs:

#### **An induction and training programme to orient and familiarize them with:**

- Their respective roles and responsibilities
- The policies they are responsible for overseeing
- How to implement both meaningfully

#### **Support to:**

- Develop ways of working collaboratively, creatively and effectively with extremely limited resources
- Develop ways to support schools to optimally utilize their limited resources

#### **Interpersonal skills training that will:**

- Support officials to embrace, model and enable schools to adopt and implement the values, attitudes and practices expressed in the Constitution, in the Batho Pele Principles and embodied in policy guidelines

#### **More specifically**

##### **CMs need:**

- Clarification of their roles and responsibilities in general
- A reduced scope of work so that they are able to focus on key issues related to establishing basic school functionality and the leadership and management capacity necessary to sustain it

- Ongoing on-the-job training and support to meaningfully support principals and SMTs to lead and manage their schools to effective basic functionality

**CAs need:**

- Support to find appropriate ways to enable meaningful curriculum implementation in clusters of schools, in ongoing cycles, so as to address the challenge presented by the number of schools they have to support
- Ongoing on-the-job training and support to meaningfully enable effective curriculum implementation in a large number of schools

**The DPP's proposed intervention programme**

The DPP will attempt to address these identified needs through capacity building interventions focussed on the following key leverage points:

**Knowledge, values, attitudes and practices:**

- 1) Role functions and responsibilities
- 2) Policy engagement, understanding and practical implementation
- 3) Personal and interpersonal skills development

**Strategies:**

- 4) Working collaboratively to maximise limited resources
- 5) Working with clusters of schools to maximize impact

**The vision for the DPP**

Phase 1: Develop an effective, easily implementable model to enable District Directors and Senior Managers to lead, manage and coordinate their CM and CA staff so that they can enable schools to function effectively and implement the curriculum meaningfully.

Phase 2: Extend the model to include other district personnel whose support functions can further enable school functionality and curriculum implementation.