

EDUCATION



# COLLABORATION FOR EDUCATION

THE YEAR 2012 was a difficult one for education. There were problems with the delivery of books in Limpopo, some civil society organisations were challenging government on the norms and standards in our schools. Many South Africans felt that schools should not be conducted under trees in the veld or in mud huts or without running water and proper sanitation. The children should have their books on time, they should have decent desks and properly qualified teachers. The Minister of Basic Education was threatened with court action more than once. At dinner parties and braais many people, even those with no knowledge of education, lamented the state of the nation's education system.

Government was acutely aware of the problem. We spend close to 6% of the national budget on education, the bulk of that going to staff salaries. The National Development Plan had identified education as a major societal issue that had to be addressed.

This awareness had at least one positive outcome. An influential group of people gathered to see what the private sector could do to help. At the centre of this initiative was FirstRand chief executive Sizwe Nxasana. "A few of us decided we could sit around and complain or we could reach out and have a discussion with government, and see what we could do about the challenges facing education in our country."

The result of this gathering was the formation of the National Education Collaboration Trust (NECT). A dialogue, hosted on 6 December 2012 brought together representatives of the private sector, senior officials of the Department of Basic Education, the Presidency, NGOs, community leaders, the trade unions, youth leaders and others.

The discussion centred around two fundamental questions: What is the state of education and what can be done to improve it? The culmination of the dialogue was that all agreed our education system was less than perfect, and they would create a platform to bring together all the players. A framework for future collaboration to improve the quality of education was created."

"My own feeling was that the minister was doing her best in a difficult job," says Nxasana. "On her watch, the curriculum had been encapsulated in the national curriculum statement. And a lot of the content of Action Plan 2014 found itself into the National Development Plan."

The main objective of the NECT that came out the original dialogue with government was a determination to professionalise teaching and so improve the capacity of the state to deliver. They sought to deal with the norms and standards in education, including infrastructural backlogs. Their initiatives supported the plans that were developed, not by the NECT, but by government itself. "Our intention was to improve education in order to support the learners themselves," says Nxasana, "especially the many child headed households."

The NECT has been identified by many within government and civil society as the best existing structure to support the aims of the National Development Plan. It is also seen by many in the public service as a structure that can be replicated in other sectors. The progress it is making is considerable. It is now operating in eight districts, reaching some 4 300 schools out of the 24 000 in the country.

## THE HURDLE: UNMANAGEABLE SIZE

The Department of Basic Education has to deal with a big system, sometimes fighting fires - like the failure of the distribution of books, strikes, challenges in the appointment of teachers, and problems with feeding schemes. "Over 300 000 teachers in over 24 000 public schools take some managing."

As a result, the department sometimes does not have the time or the resources to research and experiment with new ways of learning and teaching.

"This is what NECT is starting to do," says Nxasana. He feels strongly that the future of the country depends on the success of our education system. In his view we have made substantial progress, but we could have done better. One of the areas in which progress has been made is that in the last 20 years access to education has improved radically. "We are now close to 100% of our children actually attending school. The figure 20 years ago was in the vicinity of 70%. We've also done well in improving the qualifications of teachers. We have issues in Maths, Science and English, but we are better off

## EDUCATION

than in earlier years. Unfortunately, the improvement in teaching standards has not yet translated into significantly improved marks for the children. When compared to international norms, we still rank lowly in subjects such as Maths and Science."

There is no doubt that the challenges facing the education system are complex. In Nxasana's view we have not yet got past the impact of the fragmentation of earlier years. "In the Eastern Cape, for instance, the Transkei Department of Education, the Ciskei Department of Education, the Cape Department of Education and other departments, catering for other race groups: all had to be combined into a single entity. Each had its own culture and some cultures had become so entrenched that changing them was not easy and very time consuming."

Nxasana acknowledges that young people straight from school and even university are often not ready for the world of work and need further training. "There is definitely a disjuncture between what the universities are training for and what is required by the private sector. We need another conversation between the private sector, particularly large companies, and the universities. In our company, after we hire young people we train them from the ground up. Very often we have to attend to the basics of writing and comprehension. The same applies to students that we recruit from universities. We spend as much as two years training them on work readiness.

"This does not have to be so. For example, it does not apply to the accounting profession. The mere fact that there is a much closer collaboration between the private sector, the SA Institute of Chartered Accountants and our universities means that the process of training accountants has a much deeper practical component. After completing their studies young accountants spend three years in a training office either in the private sector or professional audit practice. By the time they reach the real world of work their state of readiness is much greater than people who have not had that sort of preparation."

## THE BALANCE: REPRESENTATION AND PERFORMANCE

The role played by the trade unions, especially Sadtu, has been widely criticised. But Nxasana sees unions as a necessity in all fields, including education. "They are important as representatives of employees, to see that their members are treated fairly. They can also play a role in professionalising and educating their members. It is commendable that SADTU as an example have taken it upon themselves to set up the Curtis Nkondo Training Institute to help their members become properly trained. Sometimes education officials blame the unions for lack of discipline, absenteeism and so on. If employees of this bank are not coming to work I, as the representative of the employer body, must take action. Don't blame the union, rather discipline the individual who is at fault.

"The institutional arrangement between government, as the employer, and the union, as the employee representative, is not perfect in South Africa and needs sorting out. In our present situation these roles are sometimes clouded. There are occasions when union members also sit on the management side of negotiations. In a corporate environment this would simply not be allowed."

Nxasana's awareness of the need for change in the education's labour set-up extends to the Education Labour Relations Council. He feels that its mandate should be revisited to make sure that it is playing the role it should. "I also think the role of the SA Council of Educators (SACE) can be improved. This is a statutory body whose job it is to accredit teachers. Professional bodies can play a critical role in improving standards. They should not just certificate, but set the rules of professional conduct, discipline members who fall out of line with those rules, administer and monitor continuing professional education.

Some township schools have been accused of allowing teachers to spend only three and a half hours a day in front of their pupils, compared to suburban schools where teachers spend six hours a day teaching. "I would not generalise about that," says Nxasana. "In certain cases it may be true, but I know a number of township schools where teachers start before eight and work a full day. I know principals who are at school at 5.30 in the morning every day, and are still there after school closes and are often there on weekends too. This is a matter of leadership. You can see a good school from a mile, even before you enter the gate. It will always have a good principal, very often the community is involved, and an active school governing board plays an important oversight role. Successful schools sometimes operate with very limited resources. The difference is always leadership." •

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