



A case for Education Districts in Continuing Education Improvement:

Lessons from the National Education Collaboration Trust, February 2024

Author: Dr Godwin Khosa¹

Are education districts really a side-show?

Across the world, education improvement is approached as either a national or school level project. This is likely a result of several factors, which include a) narrow thinking about reform and improvement in education, where policy and practice are perceived as unrelated instruments of educational change; b) lack of a conceptual distinction between the four complementary tiers of the education system in South Africa: national level, provincial level, district level and the school level. Each of the tiers has a dedicated and complementary role to play in the critical path of education delivery: the national level primarily serves as the 'policy machine', the provincial level serves as the 'administrative function', districts as the 'drivers of education delivery', and the schools as 'units of delivery'¹.

The narrow thinking about reform and improvement is propagated by the predominance of the philosophical stance that favours wholesale decentralisation from the national level to schools. While the bifurcated approaches have merits, what is concerning is that the resulting role confusion, accompanied often-times by a well-orchestrated agenda, has disenfranchised district personnel of their role in education improvement. This movement continues to propagate the view that the district level plays an administrative role and is educationally inconsequential.

The notion that the district is inconsequential in educational reform is incorrect, not just from an

organisational design perspective, but also because administrative efficiency and bureaucratic compliance are necessary conditions for the educational reform project to succeed. It can, however, be argued that the levels of district disenfranchisement differ from province to province as some provinces do put districts at the fore of education delivery, and instructional leadership in particular.

Districts should simply not be left out in the discourse on and processes of improving learning. As it is argued in this paper, what is key is to be conscious of the need to correctly allocate, couple and align the roles of the various levels of the education system. This would enable the national, provincial and district tiers to play their roles in the critical path of delivery in a coherent and complementary way to ensure that schools perform.

Effective, meaningful, equitable and sustainable delivery of education by schools will be achieved if districts are centrally involved in the support and monitoring of all aspects of school level education processes including the instructional elements. Focusing on the districts ensures that school level improvement is retained, even when key staff leave the school.

This brief paper reflects on the roles of the districts and why they should be brought to the centre of the reform and improvement of

¹Dr Godwin Khosa is the Chief Executive Office of the National Education Collaboration Trust (NECT). The NECT is a partnership organisation jointly formed in 2013 by government, private sector, unions and civil society as a response to the call by the National Development Plan (NDP) for increased collaboration among stakeholders to improve educational outcomes. Since 2013, the NECT has worked with the Department of Basic Education (DBE) to design and implement improvement initiatives in all nine provinces and their 75 districts and over 22 000 (96%) of schools.

education. It draws lessons from literature on districts and the experiences of the National Education Collaboration Trust (NECT) over the past ten years to argue that districts play a critical role in education reform and continuous change. The paper, which strives to contribute to the strengthening of the much-needed education district discourse in South Africa, concludes by proposing how district-level effects on school-level education can be improved. Its primary intention is to contribute to the (re)building of the confidence of district officials to claim their space as professionals in the education reform and improvement agenda, among the schools as well as the non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and corporate social investment initiatives that play active roles in school improvement.

The discussion that follows takes the 2013 South African district policy, whose intentions are summarised in Box 1, as the starting point.

Box 1:

Policy on the Organisation, Roles and Responsibilities of Education Districts (2013)

The district policy brought to an end the lingering lack of clarity about the status of districts in South Africa, a challenge that was flagged by the ruling party in its 2009 education policy papers. The district policy spells out the authority of the districts and presents a common framework of district configuration across the nine provinces. It norms education districts in terms of nomenclature, functions (basic organogram) size, authority, roles as well as the provincial level support required to make the districts functional. Much of what is spelled out in the policy presents districts as agents of the national and provincial levels, with delegated authority for human resources, school governance and financial management.

While the district policy confirms the status and form of districts, this paper takes the view that to perform optimally, education districts in South Africa require, in addition, an educational discourse and professional identity that distinguish them from the rest of the public service and the other

tiers of the education system. This would create a corps with a more comprehensive operational framework, made up of tested and widely shared approaches, tools and instruments, for driving sustainable education improvement that places instructional leadership at the centre. Districts would be empowered to provide instructional leadership instead of just serving as regional administrative hubs.

The development of the district discourse requires recognition that the post-1994 education reform agenda is embedded in the 'school-level devolution philosophy', as articulated in the South African Schools Act, 84 of 1996, with clear accountabilities for the schools, and none for the districts. The accommodation of the district tier will thus require a philosophical adjustment of the value-system that underpins the Act.

Developing the discourse referred to above will take time and sustained, deliberate actions from the DBE, provincial departments, NGOs, education funders and academics using various methods such as research and dissemination platforms like policy briefs, seminars and dialogues. The Minister's quarterly district meetings, introduced over a decade ago, are an example of good practice in this regard. This platform has arguably done much to build an identity for districts and strengthen their capacity in as far as giving them direct access to policy changes from the national level and facilitating the sharing of good district practices across the provinces.

Unearthing the sources of incorrect perceptions of districts

There is evidence in literature and education system operations that education districts are bypassed in the discourse and practice of continuing education improvement. Firstly, there is comparatively less research and advocacy on districts compared to schoolsⁱⁱ. Also, armies of education improvement designers, funders, and practitioners with little to no knowledge of the district discourse tend to unwittingly adopt school-by-school approaches and exclude the districts. These patterns are not surprising as

a collective of 'education district dissenters' has emerged across the world in the past two decades.

The mainstay of this line of thought is that districts do not have an interest in or focus on processes, nor do they have the capacity to drive instructional change. While these claims may reflect the current situation of districts, it is untrue that this situation is by design or that it cannot be changed. Truth be told, schools, the provincial and the national levels of the education system face the same capacity challenges from time to time. Therefore, attention should be redirected from the status quo and the movement to sidestep or replace districts; to how to close the gaps so that districts optimally play their intended roles.

Contrary to the argument held by the district dissenters, the school-by-school approach carries weak ability to achieve equity, system and programme efficiency and sustainability. While individual schools would have incentives to improve, they would have weak incentives to invest their resources in the improvement of other schools; only districts have an incentive to achieve cross-school improvements. There is also empirical evidence that, even in the case of non-state driven improvement projects, the active interest of district-level administrators determines whether projects reach their goals and sustain their benefitsⁱⁱⁱ.

As mentioned in the introductory section, the district dissenters –

- Dichotomise and delink policy and practice as change instruments: They think that classroom-level improvement can be achieved through policies determined at national level with minimum input from the district level. The districts' role is perceived to be one of policy enforcement, where districts rely only on accountability-driven interventions involving monitoring, upward reporting and the application of pressure on schools. This view is not only disingenuous but demeans the capability of districts to grasp and effectively drive instructional leadership. District

officials should challenge this misconception by should challenge this misconception by demonstrating their interest in and ability to drive instructional leadership.

- Fail to understand the hierarchical 'systemness' of the education delivery function: This lack of understanding includes the inability to comprehend the conceptual distinction in the praxis sphere between the 'unit of delivery', the school, and the 'driver of delivery', the education district. This particular lapse detracts from education sector 'systems thinking' and the principle of 'separation of roles'. Arguably, schools cannot implement education delivery and oversee themselves, and neither can the districts oversee schools if they are not involved in driving the delivery and improvement processes at school-level, which includes the instructional core^{iv}. Separation of roles – duties, supervision, review and delegatio – is a critical principle for achieving the main business goals of any distributed system like that of education^v.
- Hold the view that the responsibility for education provisioning and instructional leadership should be wholly decentralised to the school level: The devolution vs centralisation debate has dominated the public service discourse over several decades, yet neither complete devolution nor complete centralisation enables smooth delivery of policy. That is why the role of midline management (like districts) is crucial to realise the benefits of each of these extreme configurations. The large, distributed and delegative education system, comprising over 24 000 schools contained in 75 districts and nine provinces should not be regarded differently from large, private sector organisations that have divisionalised and regionalised configurations aimed at managing horizontal complexity.

Debunking the myth that districts are inconsequential.

Across national systems, there are various conceptions of the roles of districts. While these

will be distinguishable based primarily on the political authority allocated to districts by the legal regime of each particular country, most districts will have common educational roles. In South Africa, districts have no political status, as it is the case in other countries where they are linked to politically elected local authorities. The South African situation presents, in fact, a golden opportunity for the professionalisation of education in South Africa since district systems are not subject to being disrupted by either municipal or national elections. Whilst this is an obvious advantage considering, in part, the appalling state of municipal governance in the country, the shielding of education districts from regional politics does remove the possibility of constructive political pressure on districts to reform and weakens their accountability to local authorities.

Another strategic opportunity provided by districts is the creation of a national talent pool from which national and the provincial administrations can draw. Therefore, districts should be seen not just as an administrative tier, but one that holds the potential to drive the entire system's capacity.

The limited conception of districts mentioned in the preceding section was reproduced by the ideological views of the first and the second waves of district research, which perceived districts to be *narrowly concerned* with resource allocation and standards (pre-1986) and the decentralisation of policy implementation, professionalisation and the top down change drive. The new wave (the third), ushered in from 1990, perceives the district as a driver of a coherent *systemic* strategy, combining the top-down and bottom-up approaches, and in this way, drawing on the strengths of the former waves. According to Elmore, 'systemic' implies 'orchestrating multiple state policies – curriculum, testing, professional development, for example – around a common set of objectives'^{vi}. This perspective involves a recognition of: the multi-tiered nature of education systems; the importance of district-wide (or organisation-wide) goals; the function-structure logic of systems made up of inputs, processes and outputs; geographic

connectedness of sub-systems; and the influence of social and political milieus within which schools operate^{vii}. Understanding districts outside the systemic lens, as often done by the district dissenters, is tantamount to adopting a simplistic view of a complex system, which is bound to be misleading.

Adding to the confusion about the nature and role of districts are misconceptions that instructional leadership is the (exclusive) remit of schools. To dispel this perception, literature that explores the definition of instructional leadership has demonstrated that districts are, in fact, able to play the two critical roles required by instructional leadership: generating the *will to reform* and having the *capacity* to do so. Districts are key to providing the leadership and the organisational capacity to plan, execute policy and sustain innovations^{viii}.

The capacity-building function requires proactive administrative actions which district officials are not only capable of but are critical to undertaking^{ix}.

'Will' on the other hand proves to be key in implementing legal mandates and instructional processes, both considered to be central to continuing improvement initiatives^x. It can be argued that the personal commitment of the district officials (an aspect of the concept of will) and their ability to establish the vision, focus and goals needed to support instructional processes are necessary organisational competencies that can best be driven (dispatched) at district level^{xi}, particularly given the district's span of command and authority, as opposed to at the individual school level, where a school has localised and relatively less authority and a smaller span of control.

Where a school is a vital delivery point of national policy, the district is the coordinator and driver of the implementation of the policy taking place at the multiple delivery points – the schools. Districts thus should not be bypassed in any education service delivery and improvement efforts.

What then are the educational district approaches and roles?

Where the national policy creates the framework for district operations, the educational approaches and roles of districts emerge as the products of several interplaying factors including how the districts interpret the district policy and other policies in their given contexts, characterised by, *inter alia*, the size of the district, the regional socio-economic development status and the provincial administrative context. While districts will inherently be unique, the following are some of their common educational roles.

1. *Districts are drivers of capacity development in schools and the district*, which is necessary for education reform and improvement. In this regard, districts ensure that the personnel, resources, attitudes and support and monitoring systems are in place to enable the schools to achieve the necessary reforms. Moreover, the district office has to build its own organisational capacity to support and monitor the schools. The requisite district capacity should comprise managerial competencies, educational and policy knowledge and a suitable culture to support the building of the necessary capacity in the schools.
2. *Districts are points of policy mediation*. Local contexts have different implications for national policy implementation. Take rural and urban contexts as one example, densely populated and low-density areas as another, expansive and narrow geographic coverage and multiple vs uniform racial profiles are others. All these circumstances make it necessary for districts to actively drive the mediation of policies in ways that suit local contexts.

Over and above mediating policies, districts are best placed to buffer the impact of national policies and process them into coherent and implementable programmes as they reach the implementation level in schools. Districts streamline the provisioning and improvement messaging to the schools. In processing multiple, top-down transactions, the role of

the districts is to test new policy ideas at the local level^{xii}. The balancing act districts play should not be thought of only in terms of the top-down interactions from the national to the provincial level and from the district offices to the schools; it should be conceived of in relation to the bottom-up interactions with the provincial and national levels, where districts feed policy implementation insights based on local implementation dynamics back to the higher tiers. Effective districts therefore hold great potential for stress-testing national policies and improvement programmes. The inter-tier balancing role of districts should thus entail blending national and local interests.

3. *Districts are spheres of political-community mediation*. In countries where districts are part of the political system, the link between district operations and their communities is primarily via elections and legislated accountabilities. Although this is not the case in South Africa, district offices interact and engage informally with their communities through non-legislated fora including civic organisations, Quality Learning and Teaching Campaign (QLTC) structures and professional bodies and teacher unions.
4. *Districts are drivers of resource distribution*. Whereas the national government is removed from local dynamics, districts, with their detailed understanding of schools' individual circumstances, requirements and needs, are well-placed to achieve allocative efficiencies across schools.

Moreover, the success of continuing improvement initiatives depends on the redistributive capabilities of the districts to ensure that each school has sufficient and equitable access to the available resources – financial, human and non-material nature – and even enrolments. As argued by Rorrer et al, alignment of resourcing to local needs demonstrates the district's 'will – or commitment – to reforms [and improvement initiatives] and contributes to the development of capacity to enact reforms [and to guarantee

their sustainability]^{xiii}. In this regard, districts influence teachers' priorities and allocate key staffing across schools. The allocation of resources also signifies the organisational purpose, values and desired outcomes of the district. It can be argued that misalignment between district resourcing on the one hand and reform and improvement objectives on the other can jeopardise both the implementation and sustainability of policy intentions and improvement initiatives.

A key value underpinning the distribution of resources is driving equity. Equity can be pursued by the districts at institutional level (among schools and circuits) and at individual level among individual learners and teachers. Programmes, policies, teaching strategies and support can be designed by districts to consciously make schools and classrooms places where all children can learn.

5. *Districts as an institutional web of actors driving complex change processes.*

Based on American experiences, Rorrer et al^{xiv}. make some instructive observations about the roles of the district.

Districts are seen as institutional actors 'bound by a web of the interrelated roles, responsibilities and accountabilities'^{xv}. The notion of districts as institutional actors is predicated on the understanding that change at the system level is non-linear and complex, and that roles and efforts of individual districts are invariably 'coupled'. The inference here is that no two districts will have the same combination and weighting of functions. This implies that even if there are common conceptual frameworks for education districts, no two districts would have the same organisational configuration in terms of systems, processes, culture and resource allocation. Rorrer et al^{xvi}. argue that variability in the coupling of district functions enables districts to respond to their unique political, social and economic contexts.

An emergent education district conceptual framework

As argued earlier in this paper, shared identity, educational approaches, instruments and tools are required to optimally operationalise the DBE's 2013 district status and norming and policy.

The following figure presents an operational framework for an education district which may be used to clarify the district's educational role, planning tenets and focus areas. The framework 'lays out the key constructs that together provide an understanding and an interpretative approach to complex reality of districts'^{xvii}.

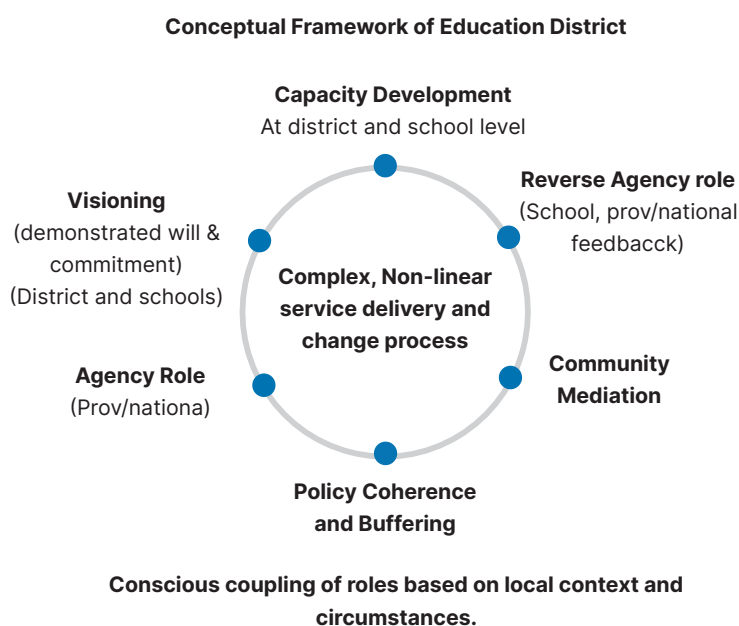


Figure 1 presents an operational framework for district which may be used further clarify the educational role, planning tenets and focus areas of the district. It 'lays out the key constructs that together provide an understanding and an interpretative approach to complex reality of districts.

As seen in the figure, the framework comprises six role constructs, which, if carefully coupled, will enable districts to drive complex, non-linear service delivery and change processes.

The constructs are described as follows:

- *Capacity development:* The leadership and the organisational capacity to plan, execute

policy competencies, educational and policy knowledge, and the culture to support the building of the necessary capacity in the schools.

- *Agency role:* Serves as the tier that enforces policy implementation and gives feedback to the provincial and national tiers. This role is largely bureaucratic and administrative.
- *Visioning:* Crafting district-specific goals demonstrated by alignment of objectives and resourcing – financial, time, human resources and tools of the trade.
- *Policy coherence and buffering:* The process of actively mediating the numerous policies and programmes from national and provincial levels to become district specific measures and sequences. This process also involves managing possible shocks and negative effects national and provincial policies and programmes may have on the unique contexts of the districts.
- *Community mediation:* Matching and managing the political and cultural demands and inputs from the local communities as well as interaction with labour.
- *Reverse agency role:* The role of the district in soliciting ground-level educational insights from schools and feeding them back into the district level as well as from districts to feed into the provincial and national levels. On the basis of this, the district plays a policy and innovation testing role.

The conceptual framework is premised on an understanding that district operations involve complex, non-linear service delivery and change processes. Therefore, each district will couple the roles based on their unique contexts and circumstances.

The understanding from the conceptual framework is used in the next section to interpret the insights from the NECT's Integrated District Improvement Programme (IDIP).

The state of the South African districts analysed against the conceptual framework. Lessons from the IDIP

The following section presents some reflections on the current state of affairs of district operations in South Africa. The reflections were arrived at following an analysis of 30 district operational profiles that were developed by the NECT's IDIP. The literature review and the conceptual framework discussed in the previous sections were applied as the interpretative frame.

Overall, the IDIP profiling confirms some of the assertions identified from the literature, in particular, the existence of widespread capacity gaps at district level and the presumed lesser focus on instructional aspects of education. Using the number of district officials to schools as a proxy of capacity; in high schools, the ratios range around 1:32 per subject, and 1:247 in primary schools^{xviii}

As can be expected, the districts differ in their application of the conceptual framework's various role constructs. Also evident from the district profiling data is the limited shared educational discourse among districts.

The analysis that follows is based on the six district roles making up the conceptual framework.

Districts as the agents of the provincial and national levels of the education system: The agency role is the most pronounced role across the districts, presumably because it is directly provided for in the DBE's district policy, which requires of districts to, among others, 'help all education institutions to deliver education of high quality', to 'have oversight over many circuits and large numbers of educational institutions', to 'operate in terms of delegations and administrative instructions from provincial HODs'^{xix}.

On the positive side, the district profiling found that some districts had basic administrative systems such as calendars of events, training schedules, assessment plans and reports on

teachers trained in mathematics and numeracy in place. Of concern, however, is that district operations generally demonstrated poor managerial and cultural practices that are necessary to effectively carry out the agency role. Other basic administrative tasks such as preparing schedules and minutes of management meetings and follow-up plans were not in place. Also, other more general practices and expected management process artefacts such as function and section plans and sets of priorities were non-existent or their quality required attention. What were supposed to be sets of priorities were instead long lists of activities; the structures required in policy and by the provincial administration were in place, but often dysfunctional, for example, District-Based Support Teams. Also, where plans existed, they were consistently biased towards Grade 12 performance at the expense of the primary schools – the absence of subject planning at primary school level is a case in point. National priorities such as literacy and numeracy improvement did not feature sufficiently in the planning. While there were pockets of excellence in some districts, on average, the basic managerial and administrative routines needed improvement.

Community mediation: Mobilisation of community support and the mediation of community demands on the education system were checkered and unstructured. The profiling process was unable to find documentation regarding planning, reporting on and actions undertaken for community engagement activities. Although district plans made mention of QLTC, generally, community engagement was treated as an ad hoc activity.

District level visioning: The profiling was unsuccessful in discerning sets of delineated and shared goals. A weak sense of the provincial and national level educational goals could be discerned in the operational documents and practices of the districts. While it was expected that national goals would be mediated into clear sets of priorities, targets and plans, there was no strong sense of alignment found between district operational plans on the one hand and those of the provincial and national levels on the other. Arguably, the absence of clear district level,

priorities erodes the basis from which the districts can plan the investment of their resources – time human resources, finances and other material and non-material inputs. While they are expected to have strong operational plans detailing out how key programmes would be implemented, these either did not exist or bore weak linkages with the provincial and national level policies and plans. The Learner Attainment and Improvement Plans (LAIPs), however, appeared to lay a good basis for connecting district operational planning to the provincial level planning and national policy. Nonetheless, the LAIPs appeared to not be regularly updated and displayed weak education change theorisation – a basic logic and assumption of how change will be achieved in the classroom. The LAIPs generally did not spell out clear support and monitoring dosages, thus creating a potential for insufficient monitoring of the required change. Weak planning arguably leads to disorganised use and thin spreading of district level resources, and, in turn, weakens a district's ability to focus schools' and teachers' attention. Weak planning dissipates the will and the capacity of the district to implement national policies and programmes.

Capacity development: Improving the ability of schools to teach is an obvious role of districts. However, the district profiling showed that not all district operational plans made provision for school-level capacity development of teachers, school managers and school governing body members. Where provision was made for training of teachers, it was often not well-structure and insufficient in terms of the number of sessions planned for or the number of recipients targeted.

The effectiveness of district support of schools is a factor of district capacity. The ratio of schools to district officials is high in most districts, particularly for primary schools. Moreover, the provision of the tools of trade such as computers was found to be patchy, and there did not appear to be deliberate skills development programmes for districts. While sufficient district resourcing will remain the holy grail, particularly in the current budget environment, minimum resourcing levels should be maintained to secure the effectiveness of the districts.

Policy coherence and buffering: Arguably a higher order function of districts, achieving policy coherence through buffering requires policy analysis and planning capabilities. Districts arguably have sufficient knowledge of the various policies affecting the schools. However, the profiling exercise revealed that districts appeared to be unable to process policies produced at national level into coherent operational plans that meet the needs of schools. The weak policy coherence was, as mentioned, evident in the absence of priority objectives and educational change theories. Where multiple national policies and programmes are not sufficiently mediated into coherent educational programmes and plans, districts miss the opportunity to effectively implement the national reform and improvement agenda including effective buffering of policy and programme transactions in line with district circumstances. This would be a plausible explanation for why districts do not practise the upward feed of insights and innovations. Some districts have, however, shared good practices at the provincial and national levels through the Ministerial quarterly district meetings. Research and evaluation and feedback processes should be integral to the work of districts, and in more structured ways.

Managing complexity and change process: Central to the conceptual model, managing complexity and change process was found to be one of the greatest challenges in the profiled districts. This inability to deal with complexity and to drive change was evident from the poor linkages between plans and meetings, too many strategic objectives in the operational plans, and the districts' inability to strike a balance in focus between the further education and training phase and the primary schools.

Conclusion: While the six points of the conceptual model can create confusion and competing areas of focus among districts, what is important is for districts to comprehensively cater for all six roles, and to couple the roles and weight them in a manner that responds to each district's specific context, capacity and operational needs.

Discussion and recommendations

This paper brought to the fore and debunked the view that districts merely play administrative, peripheral roles in the drive for instructional leadership in schools. The paper argued that districts are critical to effective, meaningful, equitable and sustainable delivery of education by schools.

Even though districts are criticised for their lack of capacity in instructional management, just as is the case with the other tiers of the education system, this requisite capacity can be built in districts. On the other hand, it should be noted that the perceived administrative strength of the districts is crucial to the achievement of school-level instructional outcomes. Functionally, districts should be considered as the point where administrative and instructional imperatives are fused into school level programmes. In terms of programming, districts create a point of interface between policy and practice, where policy intentions are translated into school-level support operations. Districts are an avenue for applying sound organisational design principles such as the separation of roles (between schools and the systems level) and the divisionalisation and regionalisation of large operations of expansive and complex systems such as education.

The development of the district discourse should be driven faster beyond the policy commitment of 2013. More research, dissemination and dialogues are needed to drive the district discourse.

As mentioned above, because South African districts are delinked from the political electoral system, they provide an opportunity to strengthen the professional core in education. Districts provide a talent pool for the provincial and national levels of the system that have the primary role of driving policy, standards and programming. However, as is, new entrants into district positions do not have dedicated professional development programmes that help them to transition from school level roles to system management roles.

While some university education faculties provide courses for districts, many of the officials are left to pursue generic education or public service management professional development avenues with little or no bearing on education systems. Observing this challenge, in 2022, the NECT introduced in a District Winter School, which aims to provide professional development for the district officials in selected areas. As suggested by the post-1994 Education Management Development Task Team^{xx}, professional development must engender a perspective that extends beyond content training to include networking, cultivation of the required culture, identities and a cadre of education managers.

It is recommended that district officials are provided with a comprehensive professional development programme which will enable them to better carry out their educational role.

Such a programme should be delivered as a prestigious, responsive programme that seek to equip district officials with the requisite policy knowledge, technical skills and cultural base for optimising district operations and educational impact at school level. Such a dedicated programme, with in-built incentives such as professional development, points to increased career advancement potential for district professionals and can help to build their envisaged professional identity and strengthen the talent pool that will drive education at provincial and national levels. It is a systemic improvement perspective that should be advocated to corporate social investment partners, intergovernmental funding and development arms, universities and statutory bodies such as the Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs).

The district conceptual framework proposed a basis on which to further develop the 2013 policy framework and guide the operations, institutional capacity development and professional identity formation of the districts. The conceptual framework advocates for the comprehensive and responsive treatment of a complex, non-linear service delivery and change machine that is the district system.

The conceptual framework requires testing and engagement by district practitioners and researchers to carve out the South African district discourse.

The improvement of district operations in the current era requires deliberate efforts to build the capabilities of districts to translate policy and programmes into a sound educational operation in districts. Improving district operations needs to be approached as a long-term commitment and as a developmental exercise that seeks to cause improvement of individual districts from where they are, although numerous districts require the fixing of some basic aspects first. Therefore, the planned actions should be disaggregated into short-term to long-term imperatives. The following three change categories were identified and can be grouped into Basic Lower Order, Mid-Level Technical Capabilities, and Higher Order Systemic-cultural change activities. Examples of these are presented in the table below.

Category	Category
Basic Lower Order aspects [1- 12 months]	Availability of calendars, training schedules and assessment plans, management meetings scheduled, agendas, follow-up activities and records.
Mid-level Technical Capabilities [up to 3 years]	Meaningful strategic and operational planning characterised by prioritising explicit objectives and theories of change and linkages between operational plans on the one hand and district management teams' (DMTs') agendas and the provincial priorities on the other. Balanced focus between high and primary schools, budgeting that is aligned to strategies, and effective risk management systems.
Higher Oder Systemic-cultural aspects [up to 5 years]	High performance culture characterised by a shared professional identity, well-I developed and shared sets of approaches, tools and instruments, and ability to innovate, stress-test policies and systematically feedback insights to the provincial and national levels. Effective monitoring, evaluation and feedback practices.

The three categories introduce the perspective of differentiated role complexity in organisations.

The first category of the aspects to be fixed in the districts are essentially 'hygiene issues' that can be addressed quickly through internally driven processes or enforcement by the national and provincial levels. It is suggested that one national circular and a series of monitoring and feedback sessions could change the state of districts within a year.

The second and third categories of proposed improvement activities would take several years to accomplish. However, these activities should be initiated now, or at least be planned for immediately. It is important to note that addressing hygiene issues will not lead to improved school performance per se, but will improve the efficiency of operations in districts as it relates to the orderly and optimum deployment of material and non-material resources in districts and follow-through on value for money.

Proposed immediate action steps by managers and practitioners

The following next steps are proposed for the key practitioners at the various levels.

1. The IDIP team, comprising the DBE district branch and NECT practitioners, should consider –
 - b. Tweaking the IDIP model including the instrumentation for the district profiling, the operational support initiatives and feedback systems.
 - c. Establishing and implementing a dissemination plan for this paper targeting district officials, provincial officials and the NGOs and researchers working in the district space.
4. The DBE District branch should consider outlining a plan for addressing the hygiene issues through the Heads of Education Departments Committee (HEDCOM) and its subcommittees and the provincial heads of districts, and for advocating for the role of

districts in driving instructional leadership.

5. The DBE District branch should further discuss and adopt, through HEDCOM, in the medium- to long-term, a plan for moving our districts towards being 'high performance' districts.
6. District officials should consider the paper and determine how to adjust planning and operations in their districts and how to bring to the centre the agenda to systematically build the capacity of the districts to carry out the functions outlined in the education district framework.
7. Researchers and the NGO community should be engaged with and encouraged to adjust their approaches to include districts.

Conclusion

The paper used literature and the experiences of the NECT of over 10 years to contribute to an understanding of the roles of districts and challenge the narrow and convenient position that districts are inconsequential.

The paper asserts that districts are the solution for cost-effective, equitable and sustainable improvement of learning and teaching and education in general. That districts do not have the requisite capacity today to optimally drive the system to achieve the envisaged instructional and educational goals should not be a good enough a reason to bypass districts or to embark on endeavours to replace them. Instead, deliberate efforts should be planned for and undertaken to address the hygiene challenges immediately, and the technical, strategic and cultural issues in the medium- to longer- term.

As observed by Elmore, any complex, multi-faceted structure needs both top-down direction and bottom-up adaptations to function in a unified way around a common set of purposes. Districts are the basis for bringing about this bi-directional organisational balance in South Africa's multi-tier education system.

End Notes

- i. Elmore, R.F., 1993. The role of local school districts in instructional improvement, in Fuhrman, S. (Ed.), *Designing Coherent Education Policy: Improving the System*, Jossey-Bass, pp. 102. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED359626.pdf#page=124>
- ii. Blazar, D. and Schueler, B., 2022. Why Do School Districts Matter? An Interdisciplinary Framework and Empirical Review. (EdWorkingPaper: 22-581). Retrieved from Annenberg Institute at Brown University: <https://doi.org/10.26300/58m4-fs65>
- iii. McDonnell, L.M. and Elmore, R.F., 1987. Getting the job done: Alternative policy instruments. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 9(2), 133-152.
- iv. As defined by Richard Elmore, this comprises teachers, learners and content as the critical complementary elements for improving student learning.
- v. Schaad, A. and Moffett, J.D., 2002, December. A framework for organisational control principles. In 18th Annual Computer Security Applications Conference, 2002. Proceedings. (pp. 229-238). IEEE.
- vi. Elmore, R.F., 1993., Ibid: 96-124.
- vii. Khosa, G., 2014. The Systemic School Improvement Model. In Khosa, G., (eds). *Systemic School Improvement Interventions in South Africa: Some Practical Lessons from Development Practitioners*, pp. 3 - 20. African Minds for JET Education Services, Johannesburg <https://www.jet.org.za/resources/jet-systemic-school-improvement-lessons.pdf>
- viii. McLaughlin, M. W. 1990. *Educational policy and educational practice*. Stanford, CA: Center for Research on the Context of Secondary School Teaching, Stanford University
- ix. Daresh, J.C., 1991. Instructional leadership as a proactive administrative process. *Theory Into Practice*, 30(2), 109-112.
- x. Rorrer, A. K., Skrla, L., & Scheurich, J. J. (2008). Districts as institutional actors in educational reform. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 44(3), 315.
- xi. Rorrer, *ibid*, 316
- xii. Spillane, J.P. 1996. Districts matter: Local educational authorities and state instructional policy. *Educational Policy*, 10(1), 63-87
- xiii. Rorrer et al, *Ibid*, 327
- xiv. Rorrer et al.
- xv. Rorrer et al, *Ibid*, 333
- xvi. Rorrer et al, *Ibid*.
- xvii. Jabareen, Y., 2009, Building a conceptual framework: Philosophy, definitions, and procedure, *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, International Institute for Qualitative Methodology (IIQM) 8(4), pp. 49-62.
- xviii. Human Resources Development Council, October 2014, *Assessing the Capacity of the District Office to Implement National Policies and Programmes*.
- xix. DBE, 2013. Policy on the Organisation, Roles and Responsibilities of Education Government Gazette, No. 36324, 3 April. <https://www.education.gov.za/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=F4jE1wmNQeA%3d&tabid=390&portalid=0&mid=1125>
- xx. Department of Education, 1996 . *Changing Management to Manage Change in Education*. Report of the Task Team on Education Management Development. Pretoria, South Africa. Education Management Development Task Team, 1996.