



# PARTNERS FOR POSSIBILITY

**Valda Clarke**, Operations Manager, and **Lynn Bolin**, Head of Communications, at Prudential Investment Managers, explain how one programme has brought together more than 200 business professionals and school principals to make meaningful progress.

**E**ducation is at the heart of Prudential's commitment to Corporate Social Investment (CSI), and we are proud to be part of a very successful programme that is helping underperforming schools undergo dramatic transformation into effective places of learning and making a meaningful difference in children's lives.

#### **What is Partners for Possibility?**

The Partners for Possibility programme was started in 2010 out of an initiative by Louise van Rhyen, a South African expert in organisational development and change management, who decided she wanted to help improve the poor state of South

African education. At its core, it teams a business professional with a school principal, with their main goal being to mobilise parents and the community to partner with the principal and teachers in overcoming the challenges faced by the schools.

There is widespread agreement that the problems in the educational system are dire. Estimates vary, but reportedly about 20,000 of the 25,000 schools in South Africa are deemed to be failing – children cannot read or do basic mathematics appropriate to their grade level. Academics are also in agreement that the country has some of the best educational policies, but that the major breakdown happens in implementation



## 150 HOURS: BUSINESS LEADER TIME REQUIRED



His ultimate goal was to create a healthy physical environment that would forge happiness and harmony for the entire school community and the surrounding neighbourhood. He wanted his pupils to reach their potential, whether it was through academics, sport, music or any other cultural activity.

“However, he acknowledged that his vision would need a lot of hard work and support from multiple resources before it could be realised. Mark was a fairly new principal – he’d only been in the position for one year, and had been through just a one-week ‘induction’ course courtesy of the Western Cape Department of Education by way of training for the position.

“He had been Deputy Head of Heathfield before he took the reins as principal, and had received mentoring from his predecessor, but like many other principals in similar schools, he faced many challenges. Some of these included:

- Non-payment of school fees and funding
- Poor maths and science marks at the school
- Poor attendance of parent-teacher meetings and participation in after-school events
- Poor pupil discipline
- Lack of support for staff development
- No resources for maintaining the school buildings and grounds
- Poor infrastructure: for example, the email server wasn’t working and the intercom system was broken due to theft
- Declining enrolment

“Mark and I began to address these challenges by first holding a Vision and Mission Workshop with staff, the school governing body and pupils. They defined a new vision and mission statement for the school that all stakeholders could take ownership of.

“We also arranged career workshops, including all the high schools in the ‘leadership circle’, which comprised a group of 10 schools in the area. We recognised that due to financial pressure many of the children in our area would need to go straight into employment once they completed their schooling, and would not be in a position to further their education.

“About 400 students from the surrounding districts attended the workshops, where about 40 business professionals, including Prudential staff, shared their knowledge, expertise and experience. We ran two more successful career days, at Heathfield High and at Oude Molen Academy of Science and Technology.

principals, business leaders and school communities have benefited from the programme. From its start in Cape Town, it has expanded to Gauteng, the Eastern Cape and Limpopo. It has also gained considerable recognition, winning several international and local awards in 2013 and 2014 for its achievements. One of the keys to its success has been its sustainability – this is due to community involvement, having many people to provide impetus.

The current goal of the PfP team is to achieve quality education for all South Africa’s children by 2022. By then, they expect to see adequate support for school principals and their teams, making the education crisis a thing of the past.

**Stories of possibility: Heathfield High School and Prudential**  
Prudential’s representative in the PfP programme is Operations Manager Valda Clarke. She relates her experience below.

“I was lucky to be able to give back to my former community by partnering with Mark Engelbrecht, the principal at Heathfield High in Retreat, near Cape Town.

“At our first meeting, I was impressed by Mark’s vision. He said: ‘A happy child, in a happy environment, leads to a happy school.’

at the individual schools. When the policies reach schools, they struggle to implement the ideas because they don’t have the capacity or knowledge of how to implement them. Louise used her deep understanding of organisational change management to craft a programme that centres on schools as the heart of the community and largest “unit of change”, so that the size and complexity of the problem didn’t become overwhelming – transformation can occur school by school.

### Leadership development

The programme has many dimensions, such as that of a leadership development process for principals and their business partners. Several formal training courses are incorporated, including: Time to Think – an international leadership development and coaching workshop developed by Nancy Cline; Flawless Consulting – a

course designed in the US over 40 years ago by Peter Block focusing on how to develop generative relationships with colleagues; and Community Building.

Apart from formal courses, there is an “action learning” component in which the business leader and the principal spend time together to grapple with practical issues at the school, and then determine how to deal with them. The business partner spends approximately 150 hours in the programme over 12 months, with each partnership assisted by a professional facilitator. The wheel opposite illustrates how much of this time is spent in various activities.

### Looking forward – an end to SA’s education crisis?

In the five years that PfP has been running, more than 200

## PARTNERS FOR POSSIBILITY (PFP) IS BASED ON THE FOLLOWING PRINCIPLES:

1. The unit of change is the school.
2. The principal is the change leader at each school.
3. The principal needs to be supported and equipped for this task.
4. The best people to support our principals are people who have knowledge and experience of leading organisational change.
5. The principal needs an actively engaged team around him/her to make change happen.
6. The school staff need parents and other community members around the school to get involved – they can’t lead change on their own.
7. The school can be a magnet for gifts and contributions from the community.
8. All those involved with the school need to be aligned behind a shared vision for the school.
9. All those in the school must be disciplined enough to be accountable and to follow through.
10. We can’t expect a quick fix – we need to invest three to five years per school.



“Through our partnership, the school connected with other businesses who helped with a business case when the school was investigating the use of alternative energy. A workshop for the leadership circle was arranged to work through the requirements of a business case for funding proposals. The workshop was facilitated by Justin Burnett (husband of Meagen Burnett, COO of Prudential). We also assisted with clarification around employment contracting, and worked with the Joint Education and Development Programme, run by John Davids (a teacher at Heathfield High), to donate and distribute diaries to three schools: Heathfield High, Crestway and Silikamva.

“As a result of these interventions, Heathfield High School has seen many improvements, in both measurable areas like academic results, and less tangible ways:

- There has been a marked improvement in pupil results across all grades.
- The school has become a draw card in the area – enrolment rose by 200 pupils, meeting its target.
- The school has become more visible for all the right reasons: new sports, arts and cultural activities.
- The school formed and became part of a Neighbourhood Watch group to reduce crime.
- The school band has become well known for its performances.
- Every teacher is now involved in an after-school activity.
- Teachers now run programmes for student counselling and extra lessons.
- Bergvliet Spar sponsored the development and maintenance of a new school website.
- Students have become involved in community programmes like Interact through the Rotary Club.
- An Alumni society has been established, which raised R10,000 in its first year.
- Two former pupils also donated a Teachers’ Resource Centre, which is part of Mark’s vision to create a happy environment for the teachers.
- Communication between Mark and the staff has improved. Mark now holds regular staff meetings to keep in touch.
- He also holds one-on-one conversations with the Grade 12 learners in which he mentors and guides them.

“The PfP programme has given me insight into unique problems principals face in South African schools. They do not have the resources that business has to call on, yet the principal is expected to run the school as a business, despite their limited expertise in areas like IT, human resources and finance.

“As business people, we are constantly exposed to a variety of networks and training which enhances our knowledge and skill; there needs to be a skills transfer where business people can pass on their knowledge to people in schools.

“For me, the Peter Block course highlighted the importance of contracting with staff, gaining commitment to projects when in meetings and establishing ownership for the issues raised. It has made me a better leader, in the sense that I have learned to get people to commit and take ownership of their responsibilities in the workplace.

“Mark reports that the programme globalised his thinking: he became more enlightened about what was going on outside of the school walls. For instance, when he thinks of fundraising projects now, he no longer thinks of selling boerewors rolls. Instead, he thinks in terms of creating a business case.

“Said Mark: ‘I have gained a world view. Schools have a certain structure, and being exposed to the business world has opened my eyes and given me a different way of looking at things. It was also wonderful to have the opportunity to go on courses and find different ways of doing things. I have also learned to empower the teachers and have become more open to their ideas.

‘In the space of one year Valda has brought in initiatives and personalised attention to our projects and helped make things happen – it’s been highly valuable having her input from a time and expertise perspective.’ ■

*All of the information in this article on South Africa’s education system and Partners for Possibility comes from: Partners for Possibility – How Business Leaders and Principals are Igniting Radical Change in South African Schools, by Mandy Collins, Knowres Publishing, 2015. www.kr.co.za*

# PRUDENTIAL PEOPLE

Meet **Valdon Theron**, Head of Institutional Business

## What does your role at Prudential involve?

I am responsible for building relationships with and servicing our institutional clients like pension funds and medical aids. I enjoy the variety of the role as I have to know something about every part of our business. I have a particular passion to make our investment approach more understandable for the average trustee.

## Your ambition during your school days...

To get an academic qualification that would allow me to have an “office job”. I am not good with my hands and not even trusted to change a lightbulb at home.

## A recent favourite read? Why did you like it?

I’m currently reading *Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less*. I’ve not yet finished the book so I am not qualified to give a definitive opinion. However, one of the key themes is “less but better” – identifying the right things and getting them done. This appeals to me as I’m always juggling a few things. As an aside, I display classic “non-essentialist” qualities in buying books. I have the unfortunate habit of buying any book that looks vaguely interesting and then not finishing it. The Kindle app has just exacerbated this problem.

## An ideal evening is...

An informal get-together with close friends and family with as much laughter as possible.

## Where did you spend your most recent holiday?

In George, spending time with my family and playing lots of golf. Is there any better place in the world? Disclosure: I was born and bred there.

## The South African you most admire is...

Hashim Amla, our national cricket captain. He is a quiet, almost reluctant leader who has proven his doubters wrong through his performances over a long period of time. Despite being a global sporting icon, he has remained remarkably humble and principled.

## South Africa’s youth needs... Education and positive role models.

## In 30 years’ time, the world will be...

Even more of a global village as technology advances at an increasing rate. I’m always surprised at how familiar some places feel when you visit them for the first time.

## Your favourite app...

Golfweather. As the name suggests, it gives you hourly forecasts on weather conditions at most golf courses. And I’m typically only interested in the weather over weekends.

## What is your number one bucket-list activity?

To watch the US Masters golf tournament at Augusta...with Ernie Els winning.

## If you didn’t work in the financial services industry, what would you do?

Probably be a teacher. I come from a family of teachers.

## New York or Paris? New York.

## Your mother taught you...

To respect all people, no matter who they are.

## What would you like to be remembered for?

Not taking myself too seriously, and being a Tottenham Hotspur fan before they won the 2017 Champions League! ■