

# Involving the community to strengthen education

Partners for Possibility pair business leaders with principals to help them run the school

**THEO GARRUN**

**W**HEN the principal of a typically well-resourced former model C school needs to make a financial decision, she will refer the matter to the school's finance committee.

The finance committee will be made up of parents who are probably all chartered accountants or at least business people experienced in these matters.

They are elected, and there may be some who wanted to serve but didn't get the nod.

This was explained to a group of interested parties at an information evening hosted by the Partners for Possibility (PfP) programme last week and Louise van Rhyn, founder and chief executive of the project, contrasted that situation to what is happening in most schools in the country where the principals have no experience in these matters and no one to call on for advice.

"Of our 25 000-odd schools, only 20 percent are running efficiently, and the rest are largely dysfunctional," Van Rhyn says.

"Research has found that in the schools that are working there are three interrelated factors present: a principal who is qualified and competent to act in that role, a com-



**LOUISE VAN RHYN**

munity that is committed and supportive, and teachers who are energised and capable of facilitating effective teaching and learning."

In any school, Van Rhyn explains, the principal has to act as a general manager, aligning the many complex tasks and activities in the direction of the educational objectives, and as a change manager, who is able to formulate a vision for the school and take it in that direction.

"The fact of the matter is that the majority of principals are being put into this role without the experience and skills required and their schools are doomed to fail," she says.

At the same time, however, there are people in the corporate world who have all the requisite skills and who, Van Rhyn says, would be willing to assist those struggling school principals as a way of making a contribution to the solution of the growing education crisis.

The upshot was the PfP programme, an initiative that has been running for about four years and has seen more than 200 business leaders paired with school principals and engaging with communities in attempt to fix the problem, one school at a time.

Partners in Education seeks to pair the principals and business people in a programme that dissolves the boundary between business and education.

"We have found that the business leader learns as much, if not more, that the principal from the partnership and, as such, PfP can be used a valuable personal and leadership growth exercise for business executives," she says.

"It takes the business leaders out of their comfort zones and gives them a glimpse of the lives of people in a world that is totally foreign to them."

The methodology for PfP is based on decades of educational and community-building research.

It is centred on the idea that mobilising community members to work together, to build better schools, creates an upward spiral of change, leading to a better quality of life and a healthier, happier and more productive country.

Traditionally, improved educa-

tion and academic outcomes can take time, but the PfP programme is starting to see dramatically improved academic results in some of the schools that got involved three years ago.

The programme has received a major boost from the Gauteng Department of Education for next year. PfP has been mobilised to introduce active citizenship to about 66 under-resourced schools in Gauteng.

Van Rhyn says the schools the department selected for the project need help in finances, human resources management and information technology as well as the information evening, which is one of a series of sessions aimed at encouraging people from the business world to become involved.

"In the PfP programme, up to now, we have required the business leader's organisation to make a financial contribution to cover the cost of the training they receive and to offset our expenses," Van Rhyn says.

"The department will now cover half of those costs, which has allowed us to extend our reach."

A number of business leaders have committed themselves to the initiative, but more are needed.

The SA Board for People Practices (SABPP) has mobilised its network and most of the schools have been promised the support of human resources management experts.

Van Rhyn sees the 66 schools on a journey to excellence as an example of the kind of partnership between the business world and

the government that the National Development Plan is calling for.

"When we received the contract we were very concerned about the fact that one of our key success factors for this kind of engagement was not in place," she says.

"We usually invite principals to be part of the process (so it is totally voluntary).

"In this case, the principals were instructed to be part of the programme so we knew we had to do some work to recover from this.

"That was why we immediately reached out to one of our partner organisations (the SABPP) with a request to help us find 66 HR practitioners who would be willing to help with this process by doing an appreciative assessment at the school and being willing to act as an HR adviser to the school (and the principal).

"Within three days we had a list of 80 volunteers and 53 of them have already been allocated to schools. The others are just figuring out which school they want to work with.

"This shows what is possible when we start to work in a spirit of collaboration and generosity."

The Gauteng Department of Education and the Matthew Goniwe School of Leadership and Governance are the major partners in the project.

Van Rhyn says they should be applauded for their foresight and willingness to lead change in partnership.

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