

# South Africa's Quest To Fix Education Involves An Unlikely Partner



Dan Pontefract Contributor  
Jul 26, 2018, 07:45pm • 165 views • #Leadership



Louise van Rhyn BRAND SOUTH AFRICA

The mission is crystal clear: Improve the quality of education across an entire country. How? By providing school principals of under-resourced primary and secondary schools across South Africa with a new relationship that helps to lead change.

The results have been demonstrable, but the job is far from complete.

South Africa's children are in trouble. Studies confirm that the country has one of the world's worst education systems with declining teaching quality and growing student disengagement. Parent abdication is rampant. One statistic that illustrates the state of affairs is that after four years of primary education, 78 percent of South African children cannot read for meaning.

Founded by Dr. Louise van Rhyn, **Partners for Possibilities**—the name of the social purpose group she formed in 2010 to combat the issue—is one of those rare examples where grassroots efforts can affect systemic change. As a social entrepreneur, Louise believes the problems we face in our society will be solved through cross-sector collaboration and a solid understanding of complex social change. The South African education system fit perfectly within her mindset.

Partners for Possibility is an innovative leadership development process for business *and* school leaders. The aim is for business leaders to develop their capacity to lead in a complex and unfamiliar environment by becoming a co-learning and co-action partner to a school principal. The focus of their partnership is to drive positive change in an under-resourced South African school.

It is one of the most unique partnership programs I have ever come across. First, it benefits the school principals as they gain access to the expertise and intellect of a business leader. The business leader's guidance can help in myriad ways. Second, it opens the eyes of said business leaders to the reality of public education across South Africa, in particular, those schools and communities that struggle socio-economically. Finally, it is a reciprocal leadership development experience for both parties. Of course, it's the students that stand to benefit in the long run.

## MORE FROM FORBES

So far more than 1,000 leaders across South Africa have benefited from the Partners for Possibility program. Louise and the team have won several national and international awards for their innovative approach to enable business leaders to make a significant contribution to education while developing their leadership skills. Leaders report that they learn more about leadership from working with a school in an under-resourced community than attending a course at a business school.

The program—run over a 12-month period—ultimately allows principals to acquire the skills and support needed to improve the lives of South Africa's students and their communities. The primary objective is to generate four “readiness for change” outcomes:

- A confident and energized principal;
- An aligned and cohesive school management team;
- Motivated and enthusiastic teachers;
- Parents and community members who are engaged with the school.

I asked Louise what the purpose of the program is. "Partners for Possibility's purpose is to build collective leadership capacity in and around a school, with the ultimate objective of 'School at the Center of Community.' The importance of reciprocity, relationship and trust are critical enablers to getting work done and of our overall mission."

The task at hand seems overwhelming, but Louise is determined. With 75-80 percent of South Africa's 26,000 schools deemed dysfunctional, the Partners for Possibility program has set a lofty goal of reaching over 2,000 schools by 2022.

"Strengthening the collective leadership capacity in under-resourced schools in South Africa is our ultimate goal," said Louise. Remarkably, 741 schools across eight of South Africa's nine provinces have already been positively affected by the efforts of Louise and Partners for Possibility.

By matching the business sector with principals from the public education sector, the Partners for Possibility program deliberately enables and supports a non-hierarchical process. The business leader is not a mentor. Instead, they are a “thinking partner” who ends up caring deeply about the principal, school, students, and community as well as acting as a confidante, committed to creating a “safe space” to vent, learn and grow.

"These business leaders join Partners for Possibility," said Louise, "and partner with a principal because they want to. They show up because they don't want to let their partner down. We think this is the 'magic sauce.'"

The Partners for Possibility program made me stop and think of the massive opportunity that remains relatively untapped in today's society.

The amount of expertise that sits in today's corporate organizations is nearly infinite. Knowledge and experience like this ought to be passed on to public education system administrators and teachers. In turn and with a nod to reciprocity, the eyes of corporate professionals might be opened more comprehensively than ever before as it pertains to the quality of public education, regardless of country.

Kudos to Louise van Rhyn for being a pioneer. Good luck to her in the quest to improve South Africa's education system.

---

*Dan Pontefract is the author of THE PURPOSE EFFECT & FLAT ARMY. His next book, OPEN to THINK, publishes September 11, 2018. He is Chief Envisioner at TELUS.*