Exploring Grade Repetition at Under-performing Schools in the Western Cape

Research Paper

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This paper aims to inform policy-makers, researchers and development practitioners in South Africa in building the evidence-base and its use in policy-making to address poverty and inequality. It is supported by the Programme to Support Pro-Poor Policy Development (PSPPD), a partnership between the Presidency, Republic of South Africa and the European Union. For more information about the PSPPD go to www.psppd.org.za

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Acronyms

StatsSA	Statistics South Africa
NSLA	National Strategy for Learner Attainment
LTSM	Learning and Teaching Support Material
WCED	Western Cape Education Department
SMT	School Management Team
SGB	School Governing Body
SPSS	Statistical Package for Social Sciences
LOLT	Language of Learning and Teaching
NPO	Not-for-Profit Organisation
PEC	Provincial Education Council

1 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

In its quest to achieve equity, quality and access to education in South Africa, the government has succeeded, not only in expanding access to schools for most of the population, but also in the provision of a near universal primary school education in a relatively short period. In 2002 the completion rate for primary education for 18-year-olds was 89.6%; by 2009 this had increased to 94% (StatsSA 2010, p. 43).

Despite these achievements, studies show that under-performing secondary schools in South Africa face problems with poor performance (Taylor 2007a, Taylor 2007, Fleisch & Shindler 2007). In South Africa, an under-performing school is defined as a school failing to achieve a Grade 12 pass rate of more than 60%.

In 2004 the National Department of Education developed the National Strategy for Learner Attainment (NSLA). This programme consisted of a planned and sustained series; and a set of related operations, projects, activities, strategies and interventions with short and long term objectives of raising learner performance and ensuring improved quality learner achievement in all schools[1]. As part of this programme, three strategic priorities were identified:

- Teachers – with a focus on training, development and retention
- The provision of Learning and Teaching Support Material (LTSM)
- Increasing time spent teaching

The NSLA integrated a number of different national, provincial and local initiatives into a synergistic mission-directed programme of comprehensive interventions to tackle under-performance. Despite this initiative, this paper suggests that very little has changed at under-performing schools.

Our research was conducted in the Western Cape and focused on understanding the underlying factors responsible for the poor performance of learners, which is manifested in grade repetition or failure in under-performing secondary schools. It found that most under-performing schools were located in the townships and manifest many social dysfunctionalities emanating from the social environment in which they are rooted. The resultant inequity in educational outcomes is morally, politically and economically intolerable and this paper highlights the need to have these issues addressed as a matter of urgency.

In 2006 there were 36 under-performing schools in the Western Cape. By 2009 this number had increased to 85, accounting for almost 20% of all secondary schools within the province. Despite the introduction of a number of interventions by the Western Cape Education Department (WCED), the number of under-performing schools still stood at 78 by the end of the 2010 school calendar. The research in this report will focus on the intervention that the WCED introduced during 2010.

This paper will then set out to present a set of recommendations to address poor learner attainment at under-performing schools.

1 Power point presentation of Department of Education, Pretoria, 2007.

2 METHODOLOGY

This paper draws from data collected on general aspects related to school under-performance as part of a research project funded by the Programme to Support Pro-Poor Policy Development (PSPPD) in South Africa. The unit of analysis defined for the broader study was under-performing secondary schools in the Western Cape. The sampling frame consisted of secondary schools that achieved a lower than 60% pass rate for the 2009 final National Grade 12 examinations and consisted of 22 secondary schools for which passing rate data was available at the time of finalising the sampling frame and sample population.

The sampling frame thus consisted of all confirmed 22 schools from which 14 schools were purposefully selected to ensure representation for both racial and location (urban/rural) variables. For the purpose of this study, rural schools were defined as all schools outside the Cape Metro area. Of the schools constituting the sampling frame (N=22), 15 were from within (urban), and seven from outside the Cape Metro area (rural). Of the 15 urban schools, four were classified as historically Coloured schools and 11 as historically Black schools. Of the remaining seven rural schools, six were classified as historically Black and one as a historically Coloured school. The remaining seven schools, not included in the sample, were listed as replacements in the case of refusals.

The 14 schools that constituted the sample consisted of nine urban and five rural schools. Of the nine urban schools, four were classified as historically Coloured schools and five as historically Black schools. Of the five rural schools, three were historically Black, and 2 were historically Coloured schools. Access to some schools was difficult because principals, of specifically historically Black schools, were not willing to participate in the study after being informed of the purpose. After exhausting the replacement list, the research team was forced to include additional schools that were not part of the original sampling frame to complete the fieldwork. Despite these measures and because of time constraints, the team had to settle for a completion rate of only 12 schools, instead of the intended 14.

The research methodology consisted of both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Three survey instruments (questionnaires) were developed: one for completion by the principals, one for teachers and one for learners. The questionnaires measured a range of aspects that were proven to have an impact on the functionality of a school and thus the academic performance of its learners. Table 1 gives a broad account of the type of questions included in the questionnaires by indicating categories of questions per respondent group.

Table 1: Questionnaire categories per respondent group

Questionnaire category	Respondent group		
	Principal	Teachers	Learners
School profile	✓		
Individual profile	✓	✓	✓
Human resource management	✓	✓	✓
Staff related aspects	✓		
Learner related aspects	✓		
School facilities	✓	✓	✓
Curriculum management	✓	✓	✓
Curriculum implementation		✓	
Parental and other community involvement	✓	✓	✓
School governance and management	✓	✓	
General questions (testing future perspective)			✓

Teachers were randomly selected from staff lists provided by the school, with two teachers selected for each grade. Learners were randomly selected from class lists provided by the school, with eight learners selected from each grade.

The total numbers of questionnaires completed were:

- 11 principal questionnaires
- 84 teacher questionnaires
- 436 learner questionnaires

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the School Management Team (SMT) of each school, and focus group discussions were held with available members of the School Governing Bodies (SGBs) of the selected schools. These interviews were then transcribed and analysed.

The fieldwork team consisted of four senior researchers and one research assistant. Both principals and teachers received their questionnaires approximately a week prior to the school visit by the fieldwork team to allow enough time for its completion. During the visit, two researchers were responsible for the interviews with the principal and SMT, whilst the other two researchers and the research assistant, managed the completion of the learner and teacher questionnaires. Interviews with SGBs were conducted by the research assistant at different time slots, often in the evening to accommodate working members.

Due to time constraints, learner questionnaires were completed in a group with one researcher acting as the primary facilitator whilst the other researcher and the research assistant assisted individual learners as needed. To ensure effective management of the process, learners were split into two groups (two sessions), with Group 1 consisting of Grade 8-10 learners and Group 2 consisting of Grade 11 and 12 learners.

All questionnaires were checked for correct completion by the researchers and research assistant before learners left the group. Data were captured in the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) by trained data capturers and quality checked by one of the senior researchers and research assistant before data analysis commenced. The fieldwork was conducted over a period of eight weeks, commencing in February 2011, and ending at the end of March 2011.

All questionnaires were piloted and amended during the first school visit. Given the difficulty of negotiating access to schools, and that only minor adjustments were needed after the pilot, these interviews were included as part of the final dataset.

Table 2: Sampling frame

Area distribution	Total	Historical racial classification of majority learners	
		Black	Coloured
Cape Metro	15	11	4
Cape Winelands	4	3	1
Eden and Central Karoo	1	1	0
Overberg	1	1	0
West coast	1	1	0
Total	22	17	5

Table 3: Sample

Area distribution	Total	Historical racial classification of majority learners	
		Black	Coloured
Cape Metro	9	6	3
Cape Winelands	3	2	1
Eden and Central Karoo	1	0	1
Overberg	1	1	0
West coast	0	0	0
Total	14	9	5

Table 4: Sample realisation

Area distribution	Total	Historical racial classification of majority learners	
		Black	Coloured
Cape Metro	7	3	4
Cape Winelands	3	2	1
Eden and Central Karoo	1	0	1
Overberg	1	1	0
West coast	0	0	0
Total	12	6	6

3 FINDINGS

3.1 Repetition

This paper aims to highlight high failure and repetition rates as a characteristic of under-performing schools. It does not argue that grade failure is necessarily an undesirable practice, but shows that learners get promoted too easily and this in turn has a detrimental impact on learners' later scholastic performance. Given the context of current failure and repetition policy, together with the performance of Grade 12 learners at under-performing schools, it is postulated that if students are held back according to their yearly performance, failure rates would be higher than is currently the case.

Although grade repetition *per se* is not seen as a negative practice, it is important to understand the context within which the high failure rates occur, given its impact on the learner, the educational system and ultimately the broader society. Learners who fail are often ostracised and labeled by the school and their peers. They tend to experience problems with self-confidence and develop negative attitudes toward education and schools.

Other consequences of high failure and repetition rates:

- Resources at schools are placed under pressure by high failure rates
- Classrooms become overcrowded and teachers overworked with an inevitable resultant decline in the quality of teaching and learning
- Catering for substantially higher pupil numbers places huge additional pressure on the fiscus
- A less tangible consequence for schools is the long-term damage high rates of repetition can cause on the well-being of staff and the reputation of the school as a centre of education.

3.1.1 Race and performance

The study found that most learners at under-performing schools were predominantly Black (66%) in a province where Coloureds are the majority and Blacks constitutes approximately 30% of the provincial population.

In contrast, only 30% of learners in these schools were Coloured. When we compared the demographic profile of the province with the profile of learners at under-performing schools, it became evident that Coloureds are under-represented at under-performing schools. Forty one percent of all learners in under-performing schools indicated that they had repeated one or more grades. On the face of it, the data for under-performing schools showed no significant difference in repetition rates between Black and Coloured learners. However, further analysis revealed that Coloured learners at under-performing schools were more likely to show multiple repetition rates compared to Black learners. For example, 80% of Coloured learners repeated multiple grades compared to 35% of Black learners. This was an unexpected finding as the Coloured learners in the study show better socio-economic living environments than their Black counterparts.

One possible reason for this finding is a seemingly difference in views regarding the importance of education between Black and Coloured learners. This finding is supported by the findings of Salo (2005) where she shows this relative disregard towards education, specifically by the Coloured youth, as emanating from a culture deeply imbedded in social perceptions of future reality and general teenage behaviour. The factors that suggest a "poorer" culture of learning amongst Coloured learners are the higher incidence of teenage pregnancy, and gang-related activities amongst this group. The relation between social perceptions, youth culture and educational attainment does, however, require more in-depth research.

3.1.2 Gender and performance

When comparing the failure rates between male and female learners, the data showed that female learners, in general, have greater success at school. The data found that 50% of male learners indicated repeating a grade compared to 35% of female learners. This finding is consistent with previous research done on repetition rates of male and female learners in South Africa (Gustafsson 2011:8).

We found the differential between female and male repetition rates to be quite wide at under-performing schools. One tentative explanation, offered by experienced teachers in interviews, is that girls growing up in poor socio-economic conditions and working class communities were often burdened with a raft of domestic responsibilities from a young age. This caused them to mature earlier than their male counterparts and brought with it a greater sense of goal directedness and resilience – qualities that may have influenced their relationship with the school and their studies.

But, in impoverished areas, a strong macho culture often dominated teenage peer groups. This often manifested in deviant and aggressive behaviour in the context of anti-social gang formation. The underlying ethos of many of these gangs is anti-intellectual, encourages and celebrates values, norms and behaviour focused on immediate gratification (Salo, 2005). Teachers commented that teenage boys in particular, found it difficult to resist this potent counter culture, even while attending school. This was often exacerbated by the absence of positive male role-models.

3.1.3 Rural vs urban

Repetition rates were higher in rural under-performing schools (51%) compared to urban schools (40%). Historically Black rural schools in South Africa, including farm schools, struggle to shed the legacy of urban bias in socio economic development. Rural schools are typically more under-resourced than their urban counterparts and face deeper levels of poverty than urban areas (Bloch, 2009).

3.1.4 Back to the primary schools

Sixty-two percent of all grade repetitions at under-performing schools occurred at secondary school level, that is, Grades 8 and 9. Thirty one percent of grade repetitions at under-performing schools occurred at primary school level, these are Grades 1 to 7, with only 7% of learners repeating grades in both primary and secondary school.

In measuring repetition of individual learners' rates over time, the data strongly suggest that learners struggle during the first two years of schooling - Grades 1 and 2, with repetition rates declining between Grades 3 and 7. From Grade 8 the data show a steady increase in the percentage of learners falling behind, with failure rates showing a peak in Grades 10 and 11.

During in-depth interviews with teachers, principals, SMT and SGB members, a clear and strong perception on the primary cause of repetition was communicated, firmly placing the blame for the high failure rate evident in under-performing secondary schools on the poor quality of education at primary school level. It was repeatedly stressed by the participants that primary schools are failing in their duty to lay a solid educational foundation, especially in numeracy and literacy. This creates a shaky platform from which Grade 8 learners launch into the much more varied and demanding curriculum of secondary school.

Given this response, an investigation into the performance of primary schools in township and rural areas, primarily feeding under-performing secondary schools, should be conducted in the search for an explanation for their persistent under-performance. The table illustrates the impact of (multiple) grade repetition on the age composition of classes and the extent to which learners drop behind the normative age for a specific grade, by showing the age of learners as per grade at the time of the study, compared to the normative age generally expected.

Table 5: Grade and corresponding normative age of learner (2011)

Current age of learner	Grade and corresponding normative age					Total
	Gr. 8 (13-14 years)	Gr. 9 (14-15 years)	Gr. 10 (15-16 years)	Gr. 11 (16-17 years)	Gr. 12 (17-18 years)	
12	3,8					0,7%
13	38,0	2,8	1,0			7,6%
14	36,7	38,0	4,0		1,1	14,1%
15	16,5	31,0	33,0	1,1	1,1	16,2%
16	2,5	16,9	31,0	19,1	4,5	15,5%
17	2,5	5,6	21,0	34,0	37,5	21,3%
18	3,8	5,6	6,0	20,2	22,7	11,3%
19			2,0	16,0	19,3	7.9%
20			1,0	5,3	10,2	3,5%
21				3,2	2,3	1,2%
22				1,1	1,1	0,5%
26			1,0			0,2%
Total number per grade	22	28	31	46	33	160
Total %	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0	100

3.2 Factors that impact on high levels of grade repetition at under-performing schools

The research in this paper found that the root causes for the high levels of repetition at under-performing schools can primarily be related to three factors:

- inappropriate policy
- school related factors
- socio-economic factors

3.2.1 Inappropriate policy

Principals, SMTs and teachers agree that the most important issue that impacts on grade repetition is of a systemic and policy nature.

Current policy states that a child may only be "held back" once per educational phase. This imperative forces and causes schools to promote learners to the next grade without them having mastered the necessary subject knowledge and educational competencies as demanded by the curriculum.

This was found to be fundamental to the under-performance of learners (and for that matter schools) because, as one teacher at a rural school said:
"*...the school system is saturated with this problem, we are forced to promote mediocrity by the system... we pass the ball on to the next teacher... as the child grows older the problem grows bigger... when only 28% of the matriculants pass, we get the blame, then we are told to pull up our socks, to get more involved... I have told the District Office the problem started 10 years ago, they say they know, but that we must 'maak 'n plan'...*".

A SMT member responsible for the Grade 8 learners at another rural school related her experience:

"*...last year we had 159 Grade 8s... I saw right at the beginning of the year we were going to struggle with these children... they come from a variety of rural farm schools that are very weak... some could not read or write a sentence… I begged the District Office to keep 79 learners back; they would never make it in Grade 9... I was not allowed to do so; it seems they are too afraid of the Head office in Cape Town...*"

Teachers and SMT members interviewed felt strongly that District Offices were not helpful in dealing with the contradictions and anomalies created by the application of this current policy. They were of the opinion that the District Offices were often caught between the realities of what was happening at schools and strict adherence to a set of tight target and policy prescriptions.

The high prevalence of learners leaving the formal school system in Grades 10 and 11 should be seen as a direct consequence of the enforced promotion of educationally unfit learners caused by, as one SMT member described it, *"the indiscriminate and reckless application of a mindless policy"*. Another respondent described the present promotion policy as *"perverse, a cynical chase after numbers"*. It was stressed that it was *"a selfish policy, designed to protect the education authorities and the school system whilst doing an enormous disservice to the children and their parents"*.

3.2.2 School-related factors

School related factors have been extensively discussed in literature and highlight operational areas within the schooling environment spanning teaching and learning, leadership and management, safety and security, school culture, governance and stakeholder participation (Christie, 2001, and Taylor, 2007, 2008).

3.2.2.1 Leadership and organisational systems

Leadership and organisational systems was shown as having a profound impact on the quality of teaching and learning at a school. Findings from our research suggest that in approximately 60% of under-performing schools surveyed, the relationship between the SMT and principal could be described as tense, at best, and dysfunctional, at worst. SMTs criticised the quality of leadership and the dedication of some principals. At one school visited, the principal was absent on both occasions the research team arrived. No explanation for this was given. Allegations were made by SMTs about principals not taking action against teachers whose behaviour was undisciplined and unprofessional, and about principals who were too afraid to discipline learners, and who did not protect teachers against abusive parents. SMT members were also dissatisfied with the quality of communication within schools, alleging that principals withheld information as they chose.

SMT members pointed out that weak and ineffective leadership impacted directly on the quality of teaching and learning as teachers struggle to manage classes because of a pervasive lack of discipline; feel insecure because of the absence of clear procedures and directives; and in some cases, feel unappreciated.

This leads to a hugely unmotivated and demoralised teaching corps with subsequent harmful consequences for quality teaching. From protracted interactions with SMT members (some interviews were spread over a number of days) at the under-performing schools, it became apparent that they were also disillusioned and lacking in enthusiasm.

3.2.2.2 School management teams (SMT)

Teachers were divided on the perceived contribution made by SMTs towards improving their teaching. It was disconcerting that a significant percentage indicated that SMTs never call meetings with teachers. Although there was broad agreement that meetings with SMTs facilitate communication and the flow of important information that help them deal with, what one teacher referred to as the *"ever growing stack of paper work and deadlines"*, nearly 40% felt these meetings were mere talk shops with few decisions being acted upon and implemented.

Very few teachers thought regular meetings with SMTs assisted them with curriculum issues, specific questions around subject content, improvement of their style of teaching or the effective management of classes. According to teachers, SMTs are not able to add value because they lack adequate critical knowledge, technical capacity and are weak leaders and managers. Teachers articulated a need for effective assistance, guidance and mentoring in most aspects of teaching, but specifically around issues of effective delivery of curricula and class management.

3.2.2.3 School governing bodies (SGB)

All schools included in the study reported to have a properly constituted SGB. School governing bodies have the potential to make important contributions to quality teaching and learning and to the effective functioning of schools. Whereas SGB members mostly held positive views about their role in improving educational outcomes, principals and teachers were less enthusiastic about their role. Virtually all principals confirmed that SGB members were equipped in performing a number of mandatory functions, but did not add much value in empowering the school to any significant extent, lamenting a general lack of financial acumen or fundraising abilities the resultant *"poor man's educational diet"* their schools have to function with.

Teachers were even more critical when evaluating the role of SGBs. Thirty-eight percent thought they made no real tangible contribution to the school, in general, and the education of children, in particular. They felt SGBs played a strong role in the low morale amongst both teachers and learners by criticising rather than building competencies and self-esteem. The view that was repeatedly expressed was that members of the SGB were mostly from working class backgrounds and that they did not fully grasp the challenges that teachers and schools faced on a daily basis, nor were they able to help address the problems teachers encountered on a regular basis.

Teachers also felt that SGBs were often incapable of helping to apply effective disciplinary measures, like recommending expulsion. This had a destructive impact on the overall dynamic of a school. They were also of the opinion that SGBs did not have the necessary knowledge to make informed decisions regarding teacher appointments.

According to teachers, the lack of capacity amongst SGB members to effectively raise funds for their schools, as one of the most important strategic functions of school governing bodies, forces them to divert their attention from teaching-related activities to fundraising.

Collectively these factors served to impact negatively on quality tuition and instruction, partially explaining under-performance at these schools.

3.2.2.4. Absenteeism, class skipping and late coming by teachers and learners

Principals and SMTs in turn were frustrated with the high levels of absenteeism of teachers at under-performing schools and claimed it played a significant role in failure and repetition rates at their schools. They felt that this has a profound impact on the lack of teaching and learning in classrooms and *"time on task spent"* [2] at these schools.

Principals of schools catering for Xhosa-speaking learners singled out the serious disruptive impact that the phenomenon of teachers attending funerals in the Eastern Cape has on a sustainable educational programme. Present departmental policy requires a minimum number of days of absence before a temporary replacement can be employed. Often teachers return before replacements can be requested, leaving learners without tuition for consecutive days. One principal referred to *"the white school with lots of money in the town"* having a reservoir of highly qualified stand-by teachers that get paid to stand in for absent teachers. Some SMT members thought that endemic absenteeism of both teachers and learners was a result of the lack of discipline and non-implementation of existing policies due to absent or weak leadership demonstrated by principals.

Contact time between teachers and learners was severely compromised, not just by high rates of absenteeism and late coming, but also by the skipping of class hours by learners and teachers alike. Eighty-two percent of principals indicated that learners at under-performing schools were *"always late"* whilst 36% indicated that staff members were *"always late"*.

2 Time and task is defined in this paper as the time spent directly on instructional or learning tasks within each lesson by teachers.

Forty-five percent of principals indicated that skipping class hours by learners *"always"* happened, whilst 55% stated that staff members *"sometimes"* did. In the case of staff members, these problems are often exacerbated by the absence of an effective policy governing such behaviour in under-performing schools. In slightly more than 50% of the sample schools, principals indicated that there was no staff policy governing absenteeism, late coming or the skipping of class hours. In the few schools where such a policy was in place, it was often not effectively enforced.

3.2.2.5 Language of learning and teaching

The medium of instruction in schools, referred to as the language of learning and teaching (LOLT), was singled out as a serious constraint on effective instruction and learning at the Black under-performing schools.

Responses relating to the language used when teaching showed that different practices are followed, specifically amongst teachers whose mother tongue was not English or Afrikaans. In spite of formal policy regulations stating the language of teaching and learning as English and Afrikaans, a great number of teachers at under-performing schools indicated the use of mother tongue instruction. In all these cases, mother tongue referred to isiXhosa. This seemed to be mainly due to teachers and learners limited proficiency in English. This was illustrated by reports from teachers from a specific school mentioning cases of Grade 9 learners not being able to answer a class test and merely submitting the questions back as answers, effectively exhibiting zero competence in comprehending any English.

Less than 20% of learners who repeated a grade received schooling in their mother tongue compared to 33% who were partially schooled in their home language, and nearly 50% who were taught in a first or second additional language. In many classes the researchers observed how teachers switched between languages, often conversing in isiXhosa to explain subject content. If strictly applied, this practice is against official policy. A unique challenge is presented by learners migrating from the Eastern Cape, who in many instances, do not even have rudimentary proficiency in English. All stakeholders at Black schools were unanimous that the present LOLT policy was not working and was significantly contributing to high repetition rates.

3.2.2.6 Overcrowding of classrooms and teacher to learner ratios

Our research established that overcrowding impacts the classroom environment in many ways. Overcrowding, especially in the lower grades of secondary schools, has a negative impact on teaching and learning. Learners, who were already educationally compromised at primary school level, are thrust into overcrowded classrooms.

The research found that for most under-performing schools the teacher-to-learner ratio is 40 learners per teacher. This is higher than the provincial average of 29 learners per teacher.

Teaching and learning in under-performing schools has to take place in an environment marked by both overcrowding and high learner-to-teacher ratios. Clearly this type of environment is conducive to neither teaching nor learning. Teachers complained that these conditions greatly impacted learner concentration. Overcrowded classrooms make it impossible for teachers to move between desks and even between the front row and the chalkboard. This, together with high learner-to-teacher rations, makes any personal assistance during classes practically impossible. In addition, large class sizes make it extremely difficult for teachers to enforce discipline.

Table 6: Average learner-to-teacher ratio for the period 2008-2010

Learner Grade group	Learner-to-teacher ratio as reported for the period 2008-2010		
	2008	2009	2010
Grade 8	46/1	42/1	44/1
Grade 9	41/1	38/1	44/1
Grade 10	46/1	43/1	42/1
Grade 11	42/1	45/1	40/1
Grade 12	41/1	43/1	40/1

3.2.2.7 Safety and security of the school ecology

A stable, peaceful and safe school environment is conducive to successful learning. Our findings suggest that issues around safety and security, both on the school grounds and in the classroom, have an impact on repetition rates. The data shows that incidences of violence, intimidation, illegal possession of drugs, inappropriate sexual behaviour, alcohol abuse and bodily injury to learners, verbal abuse and weapon possession, are high in the schools sampled. Many teachers and learners also have to deal with intimidation, aggressive and violent behaviour in classrooms, which makes teaching and learning difficult. Eighty-seven percent of teachers indicated that disruptive learners significantly limit teaching and learning.

Table 7: Key issues and problems (identified by learners) that impact on safety and security at under-performing schools

How often does the following happen at your school?			
Aspects related to safety and security at school	**Always (%)**	**Sometimes (%)**	**Never (%)**
Swearing	39,2	48,6	12,2
Vandalism	23,7	58,5	17,8
Theft	28	56,9	15,2
Intimidation or verbal abuse amongst learners	23,1	57	19,9
Physical/bodily injury amongst learners	13,9	62,2	23,9
Intimidation or verbal abuse amongst teachers/staff	7,1	30,4	62,5
Physical/bodily injury to teaching staff	9,9	27,4	62,6
Tobacco use or possession	50,7	31,1	18,2
Alcohol abuse or possession	9,8	38,6	51,6
Illegal drug abuse or possession	19,1	41,6	39,3
Weapon use or possession	18,3	46,8	34,9
Inappropriate sexual behaviour amongst learners	10,5	42,4	47,1
Verbal abuse of learners by teachers	10,3	43,8	45,9
Verbal abuse of teachers by learners	10,5	49,2	40,3
Inappropriate relationships between learners and teachers	19,4	24,9	55,7

The WCED has responded to the lack of safety and security at schools by launching the *Safe Schools Project*. Schools are given access to security cameras, gates and fencing with razor wire. Critics have indicated that the project does not assure the security of individuals but mainly that of the buildings and equipment. A lack of funding is a serious constraint of this initiative, preventing the project of immediately attending to urgent needs of school.

3.2.2.8 Teacher experience as an indicator of teaching quality

Our study established that lower repetition rates were associated with longer teaching experience (measured in terms of number of years teaching). In addition to teaching experience, the research findings suggest that the correspondence or alignment between subject training and actual subject taught to have an impact on repetition rates. The data found that a large proportion of teachers included in the study did not teach subjects in which they were trained. For example only 33% of teachers who specialised in Afrikaans taught Afrikaans. The absence of adequate numbers of teachers who were trained in specialist subjects like Mathematics and Physical Science means that “non-subject specialists” often have to do stand in to teach these critical subjects.

A seemingly common tendency amongst teachers identified by principals is coming to class unprepared for teaching and then using tuition time for class preparation instead of instruction, thus wasting valuable teaching time.

Table 8: Training received in the subject taught

Subject currently teaching	**Percentage of teachers who received training in the subject currently teaching**	
	Yes	**No**
Afrikaans Home Language	80	20
Afrikaans (First Additional Language)	33	67
English Home Language	100	0
English (First Additional Language)	91	9
Physical Science	67	33
Mathematics	73	27
Mathematic Literacy	82	18
Accounting	100	0

3.2.3 Socio-economic factors

The publication of the Coleman Report in the USA (1966) firmly focused on the effects of the physical and social environments on educational performance. The study confirmed that high repetition rates at schools were directly related to the adverse social and economic conditions faced by learners, but that poverty on its own was not responsible for poor educational outcomes in all cases. This is evident in the examples of some poorer countries in Sub-Saharan Africa that continued to outperform South Black pupils in international literacy and numeracy tests. Today, research continues to show that school performance is directly and fundamentally impacted by socio-economic factors such as race, gender, poverty; and neighbourhood conditions. See van der Berg (2008), Thrupp (2006) and Lee & Madyun (2009).

Our research found that most under-performing schools are located in poor communities that also exhibited dysfunctional behaviour. According to O'Connor (2004, p58) a dysfunctional community can be characterised by a *"number of social conditions/symptoms (including a state of mind in a community) such as crime, gang activities, violence and trauma, tuberculosis, alcoholism, substance abuse, teenage pregnancies.. all of which is derived from the disintegration of the nuclear family."*

According to this author a community that is dysfunctional, as defined above, has already internalised a dysfunctional system of beliefs, norms, values and knowledge. It is very difficult for schools located in dysfunctional communities to counter the culture and values of the surrounding community.

Berliner (2009:29) has found that, *"Schools whose attendance boundaries include dysfunctional neighborhoods, face ... greater challenges in nurturing student achievement than do those that draw students from healthier neighborhoods."*

Our data shows that learners at under-performing schools often come from families where both the nuclear and extended family units had disintegrated.

An analysis of the primary caregivers of the learners interviewed revealed significant differences between the caregivers of learners on the basis of race. On average 27% of local Black learners are least likely to live with both their biological parents compared to 71% of foreign Black learners and 45% of Coloured learners. The vast majority of local Blacks live with only their mother (36%) compared to 26% of Coloureds and 7% of foreign Blacks. Migrant learners were particularly vulnerable as only 26% of them live with both their biological parents, 29% live with their mothers only and a staggering 14% live without any adults in the household (compared to 3% of non-migrant learners). It is significant to note that lower rates of grade repetition were associated with those learners who lived with both their biological parents.

The low level of educational attainment amongst caregivers, even in households where both biological parents are present, suggests that parents are not able to meaningfully assist learners with homework. For example, 48% of primary breadwinners had completed some secondary schooling whilst only 28% had completed secondary school. This lack of educational attainment of caregivers is of particular relevance for Grade 11 and 12 learners, as it implies that these learners are often left with little or no educational support apart from the school system.

4 THEORETICAL AND POLICY CONSIDERATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The causes of high rates of grade failure and repetition are multiple and multi-layered. This implies that a comprehensive attack on causes is required to address performance at under-performing schools. Any solution to under-performing schools would necessarily require interventions at both school level and domains that are external to schools.

4.1 Observations around literature

Strong evidence exists showing that adherence to basic educational systems and processes can have an impact on good teaching and learning. This is well-documented by Nick Taylor (2006, 2007). His research shows that issues around the maximisation of contact time with learners in class, the presence of both learners and teachers at school and in class, makes a positive impact on educational performance and on the reduction of grade failure. Much of this is achieved by good systems and discipline. Our research has confirmed this, but also revealed that the lack of expertise at under-performing schools meant that teachers were often required to teach subjects in which they had no formal specialisation.

Our research found governance, management and leadership at under-performing schools all aspects that play a critical role at well-functioning schools to be weak. A lack of implementation of departmental systems is evident. One example of this is the high percentage of principals not adhering to the policy guidelines governing absenteeism, skipping of classes by teachers and learners and late-coming by learners in particular. This results in a chronic and systemic reduction of teaching and learning in class, that is *"time on task"*, and subsequently contributes to high failure and repetition rates amongst learners.

The critical role that a good foundation phase plays in the successful participation and eventual completion of the educational career of learners is well-established. Our research has found a relatively high percentage of learners had to repeat Grades 1 and 2, suggesting a low level of school readiness amongst six- and seven-year-olds in the townships and rural areas of the Western Cape.

A policy issue interrogated by our research was the role of official language (policy) in effective teaching and learning. Research evidence clearly points to the didactic advantages of an appropriate LOLT (Bloch, 2002). Our findings have confirmed this. Principals, SMT members and teachers have stressed the difficulties that already disadvantaged learners experience with a language medium that is not their first, and in many cases, not their second language of preference.

Although there is no consensus in the literature as to the impact of class size on teaching and learning, our research suggests that teachers have difficulty managing overcrowded classes. This is exacerbated by badly disciplined children and learners struggling with concentration and memorising work due to the regular exposure to trauma associated with domestic violence and environments saturated with social problems. Under more ideal circumstances, that is a relatively safe and stable home and community environment, and a functional school, class size might not be a critical variable; however under circumstances and conditions as described above, it does become an additional constraining and disabling variable.

The study confirmed that high repetition rates at schools were directly related to the adverse social and economic conditions faced by learners. It found most under-performing schools were located in poor, dysfunctional communities and that it was difficult for them to counter the culture and values of the surrounding community without the support of the NGO and private sectors.

5 RECOMMENDATIONS TO POLICY

These recommendations are based on research carried out in under-performing secondary schools in the Western Cape, but are of a systemic and general nature. It should be considered for implementation at all under-performing schools in South Africa.

Recommendation 1: Cast a solid foundation

High quality educare programmes should be introduced to reach the 2-4-year-olds living in vulnerable and marginalised areas before they reach their reception year.

Our findings point to substantial failure rates in the first two years of schooling. This proves that a high percentage of children in townships and rural areas are not ready to participate in formal schooling at the beginning of their school careers.

The aggressive extension of Grade R by the Department of Basic Education throughout South Africa will contribute to the improvement in the level of school readiness of the most vulnerable cohort of the youngest learners. However, many children from impoverished and working class urban and rural households are not yet catered for by facilities that offer educational programmes of a high quality.

A broad consensus exists amongst educationalists that, to successfully participate and complete formal schooling, learners must be able to comfortably deal with the first two or three years of schooling that is the Foundation Phase.

Recommendation 2: Take a new look at primary schools

The quality of teaching within the primary school sector should be improved, specifically those feeding under-performing secondary schools.

Our research found the teaching outcomes at many primary schools to not be at a level that enables Grade 7 learners to advance successfully to Grade 8 and beyond. The high repetition rate of particularly Grade 8 learners at under-performing secondary schools is proof of this.

It is recommended that the National Department of Basic Education institute a compulsory national Grade 7 assessment or examination in an effort to ensure a basic competency for learners entering secondary schooling. This will ensure that learners are assessed in a standardised fashion and that only those learners with the requisite skills are allowed to advance. It is acknowledged that this gate-keeping will inevitably increase learner numbers at primary level, so measures to assist schools in managing this development should be instituted simultaneously so as not to disrupt the educational programme.

Recommendation 3: Rethink grade promotion policy

Existing policies governing the promotion of learners per learning phase should be reconsidered.

Our research found that the current policy whereby learners are allowed to fail only a set number of grades during a 12 year cycle is fundamentally flawed and has implications for both the learner and school.

Many learners, who have already repeated the quota of grades allowed in the Intermediate Phase while attending primary school, find themselves promoted to secondary schools in the Senior Phase of the General Education and Training Band. The lack of preparedness of these learners to manage the Senior Phase is evident in the large repetition rates of Grade 8 learners.

This ultimately results in high levels of frustration and disillusionment with the education system amongst both learners and teachers at under-performing secondary schools. Learners feel lost and disengaged and their behaviour becomes disruptive. Teachers, in turn, feel demoralised and experience a sense of failure when large numbers of their learners continuously fail Grade 8. This pattern seems to repeat itself in Grades 9 and 10. Our findings suggest that the high drop-out rate in Grade 10 at under-performing schools is, to a significant extent, a consequence of this policy.

To address this, schools must be allowed to fail learners that do not achieve the required standard in examinations. No learner should be promoted without meeting the requisite standard.

Recommendation 4: Reduce teacher-to-learner ratio

The Department of Basic Education should increase the number of classrooms and teachers in the lower grades of secondary school significantly.

Our research established that learner-to-teacher ratios at under-performing secondary schools, specifically Grades 8 to 10, were higher than the prescribed norm.

We recommend that the Department of Basic Education significantly increase the human resource capacity of secondary schools in order to bring down the ratio (ideally 1 to 25). This will enable teachers to identify learning deficiencies and afford remedial intervention and/or individual assistance to learners.

Recommendation 5: Make the language policy work for learners

The Department of Education should address the present LOLT policy with a stronger focus on home language instruction.

The present official language policy prescribing teaching and learning to be in either English and/or Afrikaans in South Black secondary schools was found to profoundly debilitate or constrain both the learning and teaching process at under-performing secondary schools, which in the case of the Western Cape primarily cater for Xhosa-speaking learners.

All interviewed stakeholders stressed that the present policy is not working and creating serious impediments to the teaching and learning and that official policy was being circumvented by different means and practices by principals, SMT members and teachers.

Recommendation 6: Strengthen leadership and management

Principals should sign performance contracts, SMTs should be up-skilled and SGB's should be differently constituted.

Shortcomings with the management and governance of under-performing schools were found.

Due to poor quality of principal leadership generally found at under-performing secondary schools evidenced in poor principal accountability, it is recommended that, in conjunction with a performance contract, a mentoring system be instituted to develop leadership skills.

SMTs are perceived by teachers not to assist them in improving their skills. Teachers articulated a need for effective assistance, guidance and mentoring in most aspects of teaching, but specifically around issues of effective delivery of curricula and class management. Their contribution could be enhanced if they were up-skilled in their respective subjects and freed up more by the appointment of additional teachers.

Although SGBs potentially can make meaningful contributions, their impact is seen as limited. An important reason is the modest level of experience and skills amongst the parents of these schools suggesting the existing model is flawed when applied to schools located within a township and/or impoverished working class context.

A possible route to strengthen the capacity of SGBs is through the targeted nominations of highly skilled individuals from civil society, private sector companies and academia.

Recommendation 7: Revisit existing official policy regulating teacher absenteeism

The current official policy that regulates absenteeism amongst teachers needs to be critically reassessed by the relevant authorities.

Principals at under-performing schools stressed the negative impact on teaching and learning of the high prevalence of absenteeism amongst teachers. They alleged that many teachers exploit the current policy that regulates absenteeism. In many cases the duration of teacher absence makes it impossible for schools to access additional assistance within the context of the current departmental policy.

Recommendation 8: Building a bridge - acting on environmental challenges

A bridging mechanism should be developed to address both school and non-school issues.

Our findings have established a raft of essentially non-educational variables that influence the ability and attitude of learners to productively and optimally engage in educational programs.

Educational authorities have limited capacity and influence and are not able to act back at broad societal realities and challenges impacting on learners. It is important that society recognises and acts on these.

We recommend a bridging mechanism that brings together programmes and interventions by all stakeholders in society. Given the multi-faceted nature of variables associated with under-performance at township and rural schools, a broad-based and integrated response is sought that involves government, civil society, business and the community. This is in line with a recent statement made by the Deputy Minister of Basic Education:

"The starting point for change in the education sector is with the poorest of the poor, and the key question is how we get the public and our partners in the private sector to respond to this?"
(Deputy Minister of Basic Education, Mr. E Surty, 2011.)

An example of such a bridging system can be found in the *Madrasati My School Initiative*, developed and implemented in a school in Jordan (see Appendix 1 for details about this model). It is proposed that more such models are reviewed as positive examples of building bridges between teachers, learners, and ultimately the community.

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APPENDIX

An example: The Madrasati Model/My school initiative

As part of international benchmarking, this study identified, visited and reviewed the *Madrasati/My School Initiative* of Jordan as a model that could be adapted for the South Black context.

The *Madrasati/My School Initiative* is a grassroots initiative that tackles problems of under-performance at schools through social compacts. The *Initiative* is an autonomous, Not-for-Profit (NPO) entity with an independent board and an influential and powerful patron (in this case, Queen Rania). The *Initiative* operates at national or provincial levels, interacts directly with under-performing schools, and coordinates education and external interventions via social compacts in the form of a School Council.

The approach adopted by the *Madrasati Initiative "brings together public, private and non-profit sectors in a comprehensive education initiative that aims to improve the overall learning environment in the selected public schools"* (Madrasati 2011).

The *Initiative* is informed by the following principles: student-centeredness, partnership, cost-sharing, community ownership, volunteerism and transparency, and key benefits (as espoused in the initiative overview):

- It mobilises a renewed level of interest and engagement in addressing the issue of under-performing schools that have no viable and sustainable solutions.
- It enhances the idea of education as a social responsibility and not the sole responsibility of the government.
- It encourages schools to become the focal points for community activities, volunteerism, civic engagement and a source of community strength.
- It fosters ownership amongst parents, students and stakeholders.
- It becomes an effective mechanism for partners from public, private and civil society to work collaboratively.
- It is a door opener for the private sector to get actively involved in adopted schools.
- It enhances participation between schools and local communities through joint activities and programmes,

We propose that:
The model espoused by the *Madrasati Initiative* be amended for the South Black context.

Each province establishes a provincial *Madrasati* equivalent which could take the form of a Provincial Education Council (PEC). The PEC will be an autonomous NPO with an independent Board and a strong patron. It should be self-sustaining and be able to raise funds from government, private sector, donors, and so on.

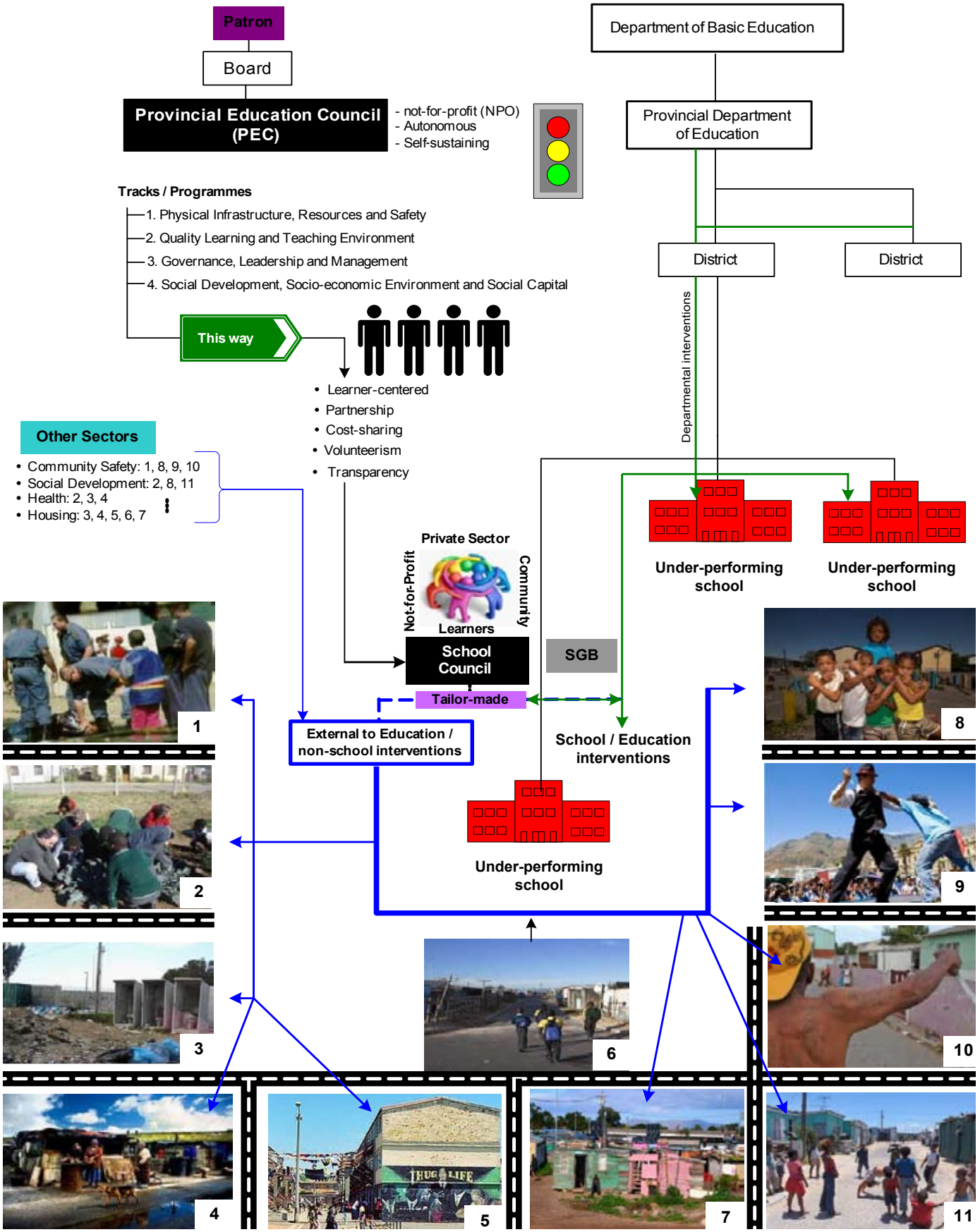
It will:

- collaborate with the Provincial Department of Education at strategic and operational levels involving action planning, programmatic interventions and resource mobilisation.
- facilitate the setting up of social compacts in the form of School Councils at identified under-performing schools.
- develop a tailor-made programmatic set of interventions per school to remedy under-performance in conjunction with other stakeholders.
- interact with schools, districts, provincial and national Departments of Education and other education and non-education stakeholders.
- coordinate province-wide cross-sectoral initiatives that involve education and non-educational interventions and stakeholders.
- do money-scouting and resource mobilisation at provincial, national and international levels.
- coordinate volunteerism and volunteer-tourism (international volunteers donating educational expertise) for educational purposes.
- coordinate, at a provincial level, programmes and support involving government, private and non-profit sectors that deals with the following four tracks of interventions:
  Track one: Dealing with physical infrastructure, resources and safety at schools.
  Track two: Creating a quality learning and teaching environment with the requisite tools - all based on a needs assessment. This will involve NGOs and will be augmented with a suite of relevant interventions by the education department.
  Track three: Strengthening governance, leadership and management.
  Track four: Social Development, Socio-economic Environment and Social Capital that includes programmes dealing with health, nutrition and social welfare.

School councils

At a school level the school council constitutes the social compact consisting of learners, youth, teachers, parents, community members, district and departmental officials, NGOs, private sector, and so on. The school council works with the SGBs and collectively explores solutions to multi-faceted problems facing these under-performing schools, and implements tailor-made programmes based on the four tracks of interventions by working with various partners. The school council with the Provincial Educational Council will seek a sponsor for the school so that the school can gain access to additional financial support, the benefit of corporate experience, and access to additional networks.

This can be illustrated as follows:



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