Introduction

The GM South Africa Foundation is not a grant making organisation. The Foundation follows a process of undertaking the project management of innovative education and housing projects in the Eastern Cape, usually within the Nelson Mandela Bay area. All the lessons learnt and materials developed during the piloting process are written up in the form of practical and implementable guidelines.

This information is then shared with interested organisations across the country in order to promote the replication of successful new development models and to influence the State in the formulation of practical policies and implementation procedures.

Mission Statement

The GM South Africa Foundation’s mission is to facilitate meaningful and sustainable socio-economic development in South Africa’s disadvantaged communities by implementing new developmental projects structured as innovative replicable models which draw all key stakeholders together behind a common vision.

Current education and housing projects:

Education Initiatives

- Achieving Out of the Dust - School Improvement DVD-based Learning Programme
- Backpackers - Life Skills for Young Teens
- Building Solid Foundations - Foundation Phase Improvement
- District Office Model based on Circuit Teams
- Governance Initiative – including School Governing Body and Representative Council of Learners Programmes
- Initiative for Curriculum Excellence – Teacher-based programmes in Maths, Science and Instructional Leadership
- Learning Schools – Whole School Improvement
- Peace Education – including Classroom Management, Peer Mediation, Peace Clubs, Peace Lessons (Gr 4 – 6), Seeds of Compassion (Gr 3), Parenting, and School Safety
- Personal and Professional Leadership Programme
- Ready for Success – a Further Education and Training Life Skills Programme
- Reading Improvement Initiatives – Reading Clubs, Teaching Reading DVD’s
- School Principals and School Management Team Development Initiative
- Teacher Learner Care – Basic Counselling Skills for Teachers

Housing Initiatives

- Medium Density Housing
- Metro Housing Policy
- Mixed Tenure Projects
- Bridging Loans for Housing Projects
- Social Housing Construction
Bringing about school change through school self-evaluation and improvement

It is an index of a nation’s educational health when its school communities have a high level of intelligence and know how to use the tools of self-evaluation and self-improvement – John Macbeath

The GMSAF launched the Learning Schools Initiative (LSI) in 2003 to develop and pilot a relevant and innovative model of school change and improvement. Central to this model is a focus on the school as the site of change and the importance of the role of human agency - starting with school leadership and extending to include all members of the school community.

The LSI was piloted in Port Elizabeth in the Eastern Cape and is continuously being refined and updated with the current groups of primary and high schools. The model has been promoted nationally and aspects of the model are being used by different education providers nationally.

The initiative has taken key Department of Education policies, such as the Whole School Evaluation Policy and Guidelines (2001), into account in its design and implementation. All interventions to meet schools’ needs are aligned to education and other relevant policies and guidelines to ensure that schools are not overburdened with additional procedures, or confused by contrary approaches.

The LSI is founded on the premise that all schools, even the best, need to improve. School improvement needs to be integrated into a school’s culture and become part of ‘what a school does’. In order to become centres of quality teaching and learning schools need to constantly take stock of where they are, which aspects they need to improve, and to design and source interventions in these areas. While there are various whole school development and similar initiatives, few of these empower and capacitate schools to realistically engage with their needs so as to take ownership of and to integrate school improvement into their school culture. Much school improvement is undertaken because it is mandatory rather than meaningful.

The Learning Schools Initiative is innovative in that it makes school improvement manageable, practical, and meaningful. It also assists schools to integrate improvement and change into school structures, systems and processes so that they become part of the school culture. The Learning Schools Initiative has also developed some innovative systems, such as the webhosted School Self-Evaluation (SSE) programme, that assist with this process and make school evaluation motivational rather than threatening. The SSE generates reports and identifies common intervention areas across schools that allow for a more tailored intervention approach.

The LSI lodges school improvement in the broader school quality management process and follows a cycle of school self-evaluation, school improvement planning, implementation and then reflection, acknowledgement and celebration.

The Learning Schools Initiative school improvement cycle

The Learning Schools Initiative addresses the following needs within a framework of school evaluation and improvement:

- The need for a model to assist schools to undertake a self-evaluation of their needs, to assess which of these are most urgent, and to design a school improvement plan to address these needs over an identified period (3-5yrs).
- The core business of schools being teaching and learning, school improvement therefore needs to fit into the rhythm of the school timetable so as to be a manageable process that is practically integrated into the school’s structures, processes and systems.
- Schools are often overwhelmed by their many needs and the vast array of projects and other interventions that are offered by government and non-government providers to address these needs. In many schools projects and interventions are implemented in an ad hoc manner without meaningful and sustained impact. Few of these projects and interventions are monitored and integrated into school processes and systems.
- School improvement needs to be relevant to each school’s needs rather than using a generic ‘one fits all’ approach.
School Improvement needs to be supported by well-designed, workable instruments and templates that assist schools with the school improvement process.

- School leadership and management need to drive the school improvement and change process and should be integrally involved in, and equipped, to drive this.

- School improvement must improve the core business of schooling, namely teaching and learning. School improvement models need to ensure that the school’s vision and core improvement initiatives take this into account.

- The whole school community buy-into school vision, goals and change.

- Keeping track of school evaluations, resulting needs and designing appropriate interventions is challenging for school development agencies (governmental and non-governmental). There is a need for tested and workable supporting instruments and programmes to assist these agencies.

The Learning Schools Initiative addresses the above through:

- Intensively piloting a school self-evaluation, improvement and change process to gain insight into how the process should be designed and what instruments, systems and support are required to sustain this at a school level. This is partly achieved through developing good relationships with the selected school communities so as to receive honest and reliable feedback.

- Investigating, piloting and documenting ways in which school improvement can be entrenched into schools' systems, structures, processes and polices so as to become a manageable and sustainable process.

- Developing ways of working closely with school leadership and management to develop capacity for school improvement and change as well as for leading and managing schools that offer quality teaching and learning.

- Developing, piloting and replicating a webhosted school evaluation database and programme which is modelled on the national whole school evaluation policy and guidelines (2001) and includes key trends and criteria in whole school evaluation and improvement. This programme/database can be used by schools and other school development agencies to undertake an evaluation of the schools’ needs, generate reports that highlight urgent needs, and to plan interventions to meet these needs.

- Identifying a school improvement intervention programme that consists of a generic component that all schools need to engage with, which also takes into account individual school needs, goals and projects and works with schools to achieve these.

- Developing, piloting and replicating a model that includes instruments, templates, projects, programmes and interventions for school Improvement.

- Identifying and developing programmes to address key areas, identified through the schools’ self-evaluation, which are not currently being addressed through other projects.

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