

# WHAT WORKS IN DISTRICT DEVELOPMENT: LESSONS FROM THE FIELD

## DISCUSSION PAPER

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

### **BACKGROUND**

Education district offices are often the major and sometimes the only source of external assistance received by schools. From the perspective of provincial departments of education, they are the major point of contact with schools. From the NGO service providers' perspective, district offices are critical for sustainability and going to scale on school improvement. Notwithstanding their importance, many district offices lack the capacity and systems to provide the kind of services that are required. District Development Initiatives have emerged to fill this important gap in the overall national movement to improve education.

### **THE BRIEF**

- \* Identify district development programmes implemented in South Africa.
- \* Scan the designs and methodologies of different programmes, taking cognisance of recent institutional changes in provinces.
- \* Scan recent literature, research or discussion papers on the subject.

### **DISTRICT DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES: A DEFINITION**

“Projects designed to build system capacity to achieve district goals.”

These projects are likely to include: district level education management development; upgrading of district level management and administrative services; circuit level education management development; SGB training; school-level management training; and professional development (KZN, 2002)

### **CASE STUDIES**

#### *SEED: Learning Organisation Model*

This early organisational development project in the Western Cape focused on organisational culture change. It stressed the importance of democratic values within the department through developing interdisciplinary teams drawn from various layers within the organisation.

#### *DDSP: Building Strong Partnerships and Using Data*

This pioneer multi-level project, working in four provinces, has been effective in building provincial office and district level collaboration using a variety of

structural and staffing approaches. In one site the project also developed an indicator database that is proving to be effective in project and school management.

*QLP: Systemic Theory*

The largest of the multi-level initiatives working in all nine provinces developed its intervention model on the basis of a systemic theory of change. It built the change initiative around clear and achievable targets that were used to integrate the various programme components and levels.

*DIP: Teacher Development*

The Benoni/Brakpan District DIP was initiated and implemented by a district office. The project itself emerged out of problems encountered with policy implementation. To overcome problems of capacity it creatively drew on expertise both in schools and from external service providers.

*SQIP: School Audits*

A small- scale, relatively low-cost project was designed to focus on improving district offices. The project successfully pioneered the training, mentoring and support of superintendents in the complex process of school audits.

*Delta Foundation: Eastern Cape Model*

The Delta Foundation provided support to the Eastern Cape Department of Education to analyse and develop a new approach to the structure and staffing of district offices.

*SSDP: Backward Mapping*

The Soshanguve School Development Project led the way in developing a bottom-up approach to district development. Building district activities around school needs, this project developed a method for ensuring that districts respond to clients' requirements through interdisciplinary teams.

## **LESSONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. *Make certain of the problem that district development is designed to solve.*

Experience suggests that district offices often have underlying problems - such as lack of adequate staffing - which district development projects cannot solve. Unless key resources are in place, district development projects are unlikely to be effective.

2. *Ensure that district development initiatives are thoroughly aligned: Coherence means both internal and external, vertical and horizontal.*

Successful projects pay attention to organisational alignment, both with the department and internal structures within the project, as well as alignment of components such as district management development, professional development, and office systems. Coherence allows for greater focus on targets. Misalignment can send out conflicting signals.

3. *Grow a range of district development models: Pay attention to the fit between context and model*

District offices are not all alike. Specific models need to be developed to cater for poorly resourced offices in highly disadvantaged communities.

4. *Build deep government-provider partnership: Address the problems associated with externally-driven initiatives*

Many projects do not succeed because they fail to win the trust and enthusiastic commitment of district officials. Many district development projects never establish ownership in local structures. Considerable energy and time needs to be devoted to this aspect of project management.

5. *Use data to drive improvement*

Complex educational change requires sophisticated interpretation and utilisation of information. A good database on key indicators of school performance can be a lever in district development by providing a means for more effective and efficient decision-making.

6. *Combine the tools of pressure and support to focus on change*

The tools of pressure and support are key, for improvement of both district offices and schools. It is crucial to establish the right balance between pressure and support in order to avoid demoralisation on the one hand, and complacency on the other. Mobilizing both can lead to rapid and sustainable improvement, both of district offices and schools.

7. *Accountability measures, used sensibly, need to be tools of change*

There is a variety of forms of pressure or accountability. Performance-based accountability can focus districts and schools on their core business by getting them to pay attention. Bureaucratic accountability has the advantage of being more immediate to ensure that support can be provided when and where needed.

8. *Capacity- building requires a theory of learning*

Much of the current capacity- building strategies rely on transmission theories of learning. Experience in the successful projects and growing international consensus suggests that effective capacity- building must rest on a theory of learning in which the those being provided with capacity development have opportunities to work closely with experts who provide modelling, mentoring, coaching, and critical evaluation.

9. *The external service provider sector needs strengthening*

There is general consensus that the service-provider or NGO sector requires strengthening.

## **CONCLUSION**

1. While some projects are clearly showing the way forward, we cannot say much about whether programme models actually work (i.e. improve schools or increase learner achievement), or which programme models work better than their alternatives.
2. In addition to reliable and valid findings about the effects of these programme models, we also need research on efficacy of replication (going to scale).
3. In many instances the actual costs of programmes are not known. In addition to high quality evaluation on project effectiveness, it is imperative that we have detailed information on programme model costs and cost-effectiveness.
4. We also need to understand the tradeoffs between different kinds of interventions to improve districts, such as restructuring, increasing the numbers of staff, and improved training and infrastructure.

## CONTENTS

<b>INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>BACKGROUND.....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>CHANGES IN THE EDUCATION DISTRICT DEVELOPMENT FIELD .....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>TYPES OF PROGRAMMES.....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>CASE STUDIES OF DISTRICT DEVELOPMENT MODELS .....</b>	<b>13</b>
1. SEED in the Western Cape: Learning Organisations Model.....	14
2. DDSP in Kimberley: Building Strong Partnerships and Using Data .....	15
3. DIP in Benoni/Brakpan: Teacher Development .....	16
4. QLP in De Aar: Systemic-Theory Model.....	17
5. SQIP in Empangeni: Mentoring Superintendents .....	18
6. Eastern Cape Education Department: Decentralised District Office Model 20	
7. SSDP in Soshanguve: Backward Mapping.....	20
<b>LEARNING LESSONS .....</b>	<b>22</b>
Lesson One: Make certain of the problem that district development is designed to solve.....	22
Lesson Two: Ensure that district development initiatives are carefully aligned: Coherence means both internal and external, vertical and horizontal.....	23
Lesson Three: Grow a range of district development models: Pay attention to the fit between context and model.....	23
Lesson Four: Build deep partnership: Address the problems associated with externally-driven initiatives .....	24
Lesson Five: Use data to drive improvement .....	24
Lesson Six: Combine the tools of pressure and support to focus on change .....	25
Lesson Seven: Accountability instruments used sensibly need to be tools of change .....	26

<b>Lesson Eight: Capacity- building requires a theory of learning.....</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>Lesson Nine: The external service provider sector needs strengthening....</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>CONCLUSION.....</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>REFERENCES .....</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>APPENDIX .....</b>	<b>34</b>

## INTRODUCTION

During the past few years there has been increasing momentum in South Africa, as in many other education systems, towards developing education initiatives that focus on districts or local education agencies. In part, this development has come from two fundamental changes: the decentralisation of school governance and demands for higher learner achievement. The current dichotomy facing schools, and by extension, districts, is one of greater central accountability and control alongside increased demands on schools to be self-managing and ultimately self-reliant. Given these contradictory demands, it is not surprising that education districts have not been able to meet challenges presented by schools. Consequently, a steady succession of district development projects, programmes and initiatives has presented an often bewildering set of choices for departments in the effort to improve districts.

The body of international research focusing on programmes and projects to improve education districts is not extensive but is increasing due to recognition that the local government agencies are the key to large-scale and sustainable change in schools. This literature has mainly focused on establishing, evaluating and classifying strategies for district improvement. The purpose of this paper therefore is to review the major district development projects in South Africa and to categorize the different approaches. In doing so, the paper will also distil lessons about what works in district development. It will also consider some of the limitations of current initiatives, and suggest ways in which the field can move forward.

The efforts of districts to build the capacity of students, teachers, and schools are often the major, and sometimes the only, source of external assistance that schools receive. (Massell, 2000)

In summary, the aims of the paper are:

- To review the district development programmes currently or recently in operation in South Africa;
- To explore the various change models employed by these programmes;
- To highlight the lessons learned and limitations of district development programmes; and
- To consider the future directions of district development, premised on the assumption that programmes are developed on the basis of what works rather than what exists.



## BACKGROUND

District development has become a major point of discussion because of its location at the confluence of two separate streams in the education sector. From within the community of service providers, programme managers and funders of school improvement initiatives, it is the inevitable next step in the evolution of thinking and practice. For the provincial departments, it is similarly the next point of concern with

### 4 Broad Functions of District Offices

- Provision of personnel and procurement administration (some change with S21 of SASA)
- Drive policy implementation – OBE, WSE, SASA, DAS, Rightsizing, etc.
- Provide support service – learning area, psychological, audiology, etc.
- Hold schools accountable

the shift from concerns about policy development to concerns about fast-tracking delivery.

NGOs, programme managers, and funders have come to district development through an analysis of the weakness of an earlier generation of school-by-school projects or through experimentation with multi-level innovations. While important work was done by NGOs

in school-by-school initiatives, the isolated interventions seldom led to system-wide change and, more importantly, they seldom translated into sustained improvement because the provincial and/or district offices did not 'buy-in' or participate in the change initiatives. For many district/circuit offices, the earlier generation school improvement projects were add-ons running parallel to the core operations of policy implementation driven by provincial head offices. To avoid or overcome the problem of district office indifference or obstruction, the current generation of multi-level programmes has begun to work with district offices in order to align service delivery.

While the failure of the earlier generation of whole-school improvement projects framed the logic of the next generation of education development initiatives, restructuring within the provincial education departments added additional urgency to the call for capacity- building and support to the education departments at the sites where they interact with schools.

Since 1998, provinces have embarked on comprehensive organisational changes in response to both internal and external threats. The public perception of the weakness of the provincial departments and the chaos in circuit, area and regional offices created a fertile ground for change. But it was the implementation of Section 21 of the *South African Schools Act*, as well as local government amalgamation, that has hastened district office restructuring. All provincial education departments have embarked on major organisational changes, mainly concentrating on developing new customer level delivery structures, most commonly referred to as district offices. Gauteng took the lead with the amalgamation of the eighteen original districts into ten larger districts and two mega-districts. What distinguished these districts from their predecessors was the addition of a range of functions formally carried out by the closed regional offices. The new district offices in Gauteng were tasked with facilitating and supporting the implementation of the national policies such as school governance reform and curriculum change, responding to the specific needs of schools, and ensuring efficient provision of routine administrative services.

Struggling with mission overload, lack of adequate personnel, vehicles and other essential resources, as well as the absence of administrative systems and internal controls, the district offices - not surprisingly - failed to fulfil their mandates. The new, restructured, district offices continued to be the weak link in the delivery of routine

administrative services to schools (personnel and procurement), in policy implementation (school governance and curriculum reform) and improved learner performance.

This background is important, as it provides insight on the emergence of district development models. From the perspective of external agencies involved in school improvement, the major concern was that the absence of effective district offices made changes at the lower levels more complex. From the perspective of provincial head offices, ineffective district offices impeded policy delivery.

### **CHANGES IN THE EDUCATION DISTRICT DEVELOPMENT FIELD**

During the past seven years, and to some extent even prior to the first democratic election, substantial resources have been committed to school improvement initiatives. While the majority of these initiatives have emerged out of the non-government sector, an increasing number have been either sponsored or managed directly by the provincial departments themselves. The scope of these interventions is significant, both in the number of schools that receive services, and in the total amount spent on these initiatives.

Three waves of education improvement initiatives are evident. With the growing recognition that pre-1990 small-scale educator directed initiatives failed to address system-wide weaknesses, new approaches in a second wave of education improvement were initiated in the early 1990s. Drawing on the literature of whole-school development, these programmes focused on bottom-up development, either through building collaborative organisational cultures at school level or through structured processes associated with school development planning. While these projects played an important role in rebuilding the social fabric of schools that had experienced endemic and chronic conflict (Fleisch, 2002), they seldom translated into substantial gains in learner achievement.

As a result a third wave of education improvement initiatives (Harvey, 2002; Harvey & Peacock, 2001) has emerged that focus either at multi-levels, i.e. classroom, teacher, school management and district, or explicitly at the level of district office management. The assumption behind the third wave of education improvement initiatives is that for improvement to be at-scale and sustainable it must focus on consensus building, management improvement, curriculum and teaching improvement at all levels of the system. While the third wave initiatives vary in approach or method, mix of activities and scale, they share in the common recognition that district offices and district officials are pivotal, a 'crucial nexus' (Prew, 2002) to large-scale implementation and the sustainability of change.

Table 1 shows the scope of the district development initiatives that have been operating in South Africa in the past half-decade. The table suggests the diversity of the projects not only in terms of scope; from one district in one province; to multiple districts in all the provinces, the variety of funding sources and service providers and approaches.

## What Works in District Development

Table 1. Education Improvement Project with a District Development Component or Focus

Name	Acronym	Funder	Service Providers	Province(s)	Number of Districts
Canada South Africa Education Management Project	CSAEMP	CIDA	OISE	Gauteng, Free State	
District Development Support Programme	DDSP	USAID	LCD, MSTP, READ	Limpopo, Eastern Cape, KZN, Northern Cape	
District Improvement Project	DIP	DoE	Multiple	All Provinces	
District Office Model Project		Delta Foundation	Consultant	Eastern Cape	
Education Quality Improvement Project	EQUIP	NBI. Donors	Multiple	Gauteng, KZN, Western Cape	
Imbewu Project		DfID	University of Pretoria, et al	Eastern Cape	
Kgatelopele District Improvement Project	KDIP	Open Society Foundation		Limpopo	8 districts
Soshanguve School Development Project	SSDP	DoE through the DIP	LCD	Gauteng	1 district
Mahlahle District Development Project		JET		Mpumalanga	
Quality Learning Project	QLP	Business Trust	CIE, MSTP, Sacred Heart, SMA, Sameka, HSRC, MCTP, LINK, UPE	All Provinces	17 districts
School Quality Improvement Project	SQIP	Business Trust	Promat	KZN	3 districts
Systemic Enhancement for Education Development	SEED	NORAID	TIP	Western Cape	All districts

## What Works in District Development

The only comparative data available to gauge the prevalence and scale of the district development approach in relation to other modalities has been gathered by the PEDU of the KwaZulu Natal Department. Table 2 shows KZN had five integrated district development projects with a total value of R47million. This type of project is the third largest in monetary terms after spending on school building and subject specific teacher training. It clearly has superseded an earlier generation of 'whole-school' improvement projects in terms of scale of operation.

Table 2: Projects in Kwa-Zulu/Natal by Type and Level of Funding

Project Type	Number of projects per type (in 2000)	Number of projects per type (in 2001)	Number of Projects Funding Disclosed (in Values)	% Projects with Funding Disclosed	Funding Value Per Type (R million)
Education Management Development	27	29	21	72.40%	R 11,4
Educator Development: Learning Areas	39	40	21	52.50%	R 47,3
Educator Development: Professional Competencies	12	13	9	69.20%	R 11,7
Equipment, Materials and Resource Provision	15	20	8	40.00%	R 8,8
Information and Databases	8	9	4	44.40%	R 3,2
<b>Integrated District Development</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>100.00%</b>	<b>R 47,1</b>
Learner Development	8	11	9	81.80%	R 6,8
Research and Surveys	9	9	8	88.90%	R 0,7
Resource Centres	8	11	5	45.50%	R 33,6
School Infrastructure Development	10	21	20	95.20%	R 60,9
SGB Training and Development	4	5	0	0.00%	Not provided
Whole School Development	22	29	18	62.10%	R 32,2
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>166</b>	<b>202</b>	<b>128</b>	<b>63.40%</b>	<b>R 263,7</b>

Source: <http://www.kznpedu.co.za/wordfiles/Table2.doc>

The KZNDEC definition of integrated district programmes is largely based on its scope of operation. It defines these projects as "designed to build system capacity to achieve district goals." These projects are likely to include the following components: district level education management development, upgrade of district level management and administrative systems, circuit level education management development, SGB training, school level management training, and professional development. (KZN, 2002)

## **TYPES OF PROGRAMMES**

In terms of categorizing education development projects in South Africa, Roberts (2001) has recently developed a classification framework. Unlike the North American or European distinctions between top-down or bottom-up, inside-out or outside-in (Fullan, 1999), outcome or process focused approaches, Roberts notes that none of the traditional distinctions sufficiently differentiates projects in South Africa. She offers a new distinction between project approaches based on levels of operation and activities.

- School developing planning approach (where there is a singular focus on organisational development and no engagement with curriculum-related matters).
- Combined approach (where there is a simultaneous focus on management and curriculum-related matters).
- Multi-level approach. (where projects simultaneous work with institutions at different levels of the education system – e.g. schools and district offices, district and provincial structures).

Roberts's study, while it did include a number of district development projects, was not exclusively focused on projects that assisted at that level of educational change. For our purposes it would be preferable to use the distinction between:

- Multi-level approaches
- District focused/district-based approaches

This categorisation framework focuses primarily at the level at which the activities are located, but does not address the approach or methodology of the projects themselves. Drawing on the international debate, Muller & Roberts (2000) and Taylor (2001) have begun to differentiate between programmes that are supply-pushed and programmes and projects that are demand-pulled. This distinction draws on the notions of support or capacity- building versus pressure or accountability. They argue that the central distinction that differentiates projects is whether or not they have strong or weak accountability mechanisms.

## **CASE STUDIES OF DISTRICT DEVELOPMENT MODELS**

This section of the paper highlights seven case studies of district development programmes and their models of change. The choice of sites or programmes was not based on independent evidence of effectiveness, as few of the programmes have been in existence long enough to have produced definitive results. The criterion used for selection was rather that each initiative or district should stand out as having something unique or original in its implicit or explicit theory of change. The contexts, problems they were designed to solve, and the levels of resources have gone into shaping the change model that has emerged. While it would be convenient for a researcher to have clear and distinct models linked to specific programmes or district, the world-as-we-find it is seldom that compliant. While I have described case studies as distinct entities (for heuristic purposes), in practice some of the programmes contain multiple models and are part of and link together common service providers and/or funders. This is particularly true in the Northern Cape and Soshanguve case studies. I have also deliberately chosen to highlight specific features of programmes that may serve to further the debate. For example, the

backward mapping/integrated planning component of SSDP/DDSP projects is only a small component.

### **1. SEED in the Western Cape: Learning Organisations Model**

One of the earliest projects that had a district development focus was initiated in the Western Cape. Conceived as part of the original restructuring and amalgamation of the former departments into the new Western Cape Department of Education in 1998, the focus of the Systemic Enhancement for Education Development project (SEED) was on transforming the organisational culture of the new department, referred to as 'reculturing'. Driven by the Teacher In-Set Programme of the University of the Western Cape and funded by NORAD, the three- year project aimed to work at all levels of the system: the provincial head office, the area offices and circuit offices and schools, but with an explicit focus on changing the department's organisational values and style in order to improve the quality of service delivery to schools.

Conceptually, the initiative had a strong theory of change and theory of learning. Underlying the project was an analysis suggesting that the key weakness in the education system was the hierarchical and bureaucratic organisational culture. This culture thwarted change at institutional level. The project aimed to transform the department from a centralised and rule-bound organisation into a 'learning organisation', which in turn would make it far more responsive to the needs of the schools.

To develop this new culture i.e. the learning organisation, the external service providers focused their activities around shifting the Department's ways of working from line-function towards a more interdisciplinary and integrated approach in which experts and managers across post levels would work as teams. It was thought that the new team approach would assist the districts (former area offices, later Education Management Development Centres) to become more proactive in responding to schools and break the cycle of dependence.

The project has a number of activities. The NGO worked with and consulted both senior management and a change management team at the provincial head office. It provided strategic advice around organisational restructuring as well as insights into the new organisational approach, i.e. developing WCED into a learning organisation. One of the key interventions that promoted this learning organisation was the establishment of training programmes that included officials from multiple levels within the organisation. This helped build new kinds of relationships and fostered new kinds of learning. Much of the 'training' appears to have been more about communication and interaction.

Much of the more intensive work of SEED seems to have been in the pilot area offices. At the start, the focal point was on area managers and circuit managers, with the later inclusion of subject advisors. The activities focused on raising the consciousness of participants through critical reflection, theoretical input and working with participants to solve problems. In addition to formal training, the SEED team worked with individual district offices and provided on-site support and advice. The training, on-site support and advice was part of the strategy to make districts into learning organisations, inter-disciplinary teams that would monitor schools but primarily provide support and guidance so that schools themselves would become learning organisations.

## 2. DDSP in Kimberley: Building Strong Partnerships and Using Data

One of the earlier large-scale improvement initiatives to focus on districts, the theory that underlay the District Development and Support Programme project was that improved district offices are the key to improving schools. The improvement of the efficiency and effectiveness would complement or hasten the slow pace of change at school and classrooms levels. As such the service providers delivered specific

The database assists project management in the following ways:

1. Ensuring that project delivery remains tuned to needs
2. Prioritising schools for support
3. Individualising school support
4. Providing schools with regular feedback about their progress
5. Aligning project and departmental activities

district support and training to improve overall district administrative efficiency. An important added dimension of the DDSP was the emphasis on experimenting with a different approach in each of the four provinces, to add to the pool of knowledge on 'best practice.'

One of the strengths of the DDSP project was its commitment to building genuine and enduring

partnerships between provincial and district offices and service providers. It accomplished this through a variety of structural mechanisms and a set of values that it brought to each project. From the outset, the DDSP insisted that the provincial officials and the DDSP teams develop all plans jointly. At the level of implementation, the DDSP required that all training that took place with schools would be co-facilitated and co-presented with district officials. District and provincial officials were always present and played an active role in the selection of staff appointed by the project management organisation to implement the project at both provincial and district level. Specific provincial - and in some cases district - counterparts were appointed to work along side DDSP project managers. The counterpart system has proved to be an important opportunity for the sharing of skills. District officials also played an important role reviewing and approving training materials and intervention strategies. These partnership - building strategies, in conjunction with a strong commitment to trust and transparency in all matters, ensured that both provincial and district offices took ownership of the projects.

Along with its approach to partnership development, the DDSP monitoring systems have pointed to a unique use of data for district development. The accounting mechanisms imposed both by the donor (USAID) and the overall project management organisation (RTI) have been the catalyst for a new approach to improvement, one that focused on data utilisation. While the KTP initiative in the Kimberly district of the Northern Cape had all the typical activities, i.e. management development, teacher development, district training and so on, it developed an extremely innovative education information management system which became central to district and school development.

Although other projects have extensive data- gathering activities around indicators that range from learner performance to school inputs and administrative system, what distinguishes the KTP project is the quality of the database at the district office. LCD has established a very powerful database on each and every school in the district, with information updated on a regular basis.

Project managers at district offices collect, interpret and plan with the data on a regular basis. By tracking the various indicators, the project managers and district

officials are able to make strategic decisions about daily priorities. Focusing on data also allows the project to prioritise schools for monitoring and support. A user-friendly indicator system allows district officials to precisely anticipate the level and type of school needs. Schools that demonstrate adequate basic levels or substantial improvement may then receive fewer visits and lower levels of support. Similarly, schools that have failed to respond can be prioritised and additional resources focused on these institutions. The reports generated from the database of school level indicators can assist the district intervention teams to identify the priority activities for the visits. For example, if mathematic scores remain low, this may alter the composition of the teams to visit a particular school. The systematic information utilisation also provides important opportunities to give detailed feedback to schools on their improvement record. This is an important part of the accountability system, through which schools themselves can identify weaknesses and strengths. Finally, having regular and reliable information on schools also provides the districts with an opportunity to prioritise their work with the schools concerned.

While Harvey (2002) notes the difficulties in establishing and maintaining a high quality data system as a mechanism to track and monitor school improvement, it forms an important tool for changing the ways in which district offices do business. The database becomes the focal point of planning, monitoring and, ultimately, accountability.

### **3. DIP in Benoni/Brakpan: Teacher Development**

The origins of the Department of Education's District Improvement Programme (DIP) can be traced to concerns that the department had with the weaknesses in service delivery at the level of the interface between the provincial departments and the schools. One of the main instruments that the national Department has at its disposal to influence provincial departments is categorical grants. The District Improvement Programme (DIP), which consisted of grants to districts on the basis of approved business plans, was viewed as a mechanism to assist provinces in improving the quality of services at the local level.

Each province was allocated funds for a certain number of districts for the purpose of upgrading the level of services and skills. There was some ambiguity about whether the funds were to be earmarked exclusively for district offices, or offices and schools within the district boundaries. As the programme unfolded into the second funding cycle, changes were made to accommodate provincial priorities.

How did the DIP promote district development? A substantial portion of funds was spent on equipment and consumables such as computers, computer training, and other resources that could be relatively easily procured. Notwithstanding the bulk of uncreative projects, a few innovative initiatives demonstrated the ways in which department-driven initiatives could drive district improvement.

One recipients of district development funds in 1999 was the Benoni/Brakpan District of the Gauteng Department of Education. Unlike many other district initiatives, the Benoni/Brakpan District Office chose to focus on improving its capacity to support curriculum policy implementation. Emerging out of the weaknesses in the training of the foundation phase OBE training, the district identified early reading as a priority to make curriculum reform work (Fleisch, 2000; GDE, 2001). While relatively well resourced, the district had limited expertise in early reading teaching. The strategy that was crafted by the district office then focused on building capacity and expertise in the area through a number of activities. The focus was on teacher development, but included systemic assessment of learners, materials development, the provision



of learner support materials, and parent literacy. The project was driven by vision, to improve the level of reading competence of foundation phase learners.

To address the weaknesses in the district office capacity, two approaches were developed. The district office used the DIP fund to employ two NGOs that had a good reputation in the field of reading. The district also recognised that with the range of other obligations associated with the rollout of the new curriculum and the maintenance of the old, the existing number of officials would not cope. A group of eighteen foundation phase teachers were therefore seconded into the district office for a six-month period, again with DIP funds. While the project was to be managed by fulltime district education specialists, seconded teachers working within the district office took charge of the programme. Care was taken to recruit and select the most competent and experienced foundation phase teachers in the district. Over a six-month period, working closely with the NGOs, the group of seconded teachers developed a district-specific approach to early reading. New training materials were developed at the district office, based on and aligned to the training materials developed during the OBE training.

While the processes of gaining expertise in early reading continued with the group of eighteen, the second stage of the process involved going to scale with the district's approach to early reading. The seconded foundation phase teachers worked closely at school level with foundation phase teachers, introducing them to new concepts, modelling new approaches to teaching reading, and making use of assessment data to identify schools with the greatest needs. Once the project ended the seconded teachers, who had gained considerable competence and confidence, returned to their own schools but remained important resources for the district office to draw on.

Due to the district restructuring and discontinuation of District Improvement Project funding, the Early Reading Project never completed the planned three-year cycle. The final assessment of learner reading performance was never conducted.

The project was important for a number of reasons. For the purposes of capacity building, the project deliberately blurred the lines between research and development (R&D) and training. Practitioners were brought in on an equal basis with outside consultants to develop approaches that would respond to local needs and build on local expertise. The emphasis on partnership expertise also allowed what Darling Hammond (1989) called 'professional accountability' to emerge within teacher groups. The project also demonstrated that capacity existed in schools and that districts could effectively mobilize that capacity. Finally, the use of seconded teachers rather than the establishment of permanent full time posts was a creative use of the most valuable of all resources, personnel.

#### **4. QLP in De Aar: Systemic-Theory Model**

One of the most theoretically sophisticated models to have emerged in South Africa over the past seven years is the Business Trust-supported Quality Improvement Project. The project was self-consciously designed around a coherent theory of change. At the core of that theory is a notion that improvement in learner achievement - the goal of the programme - can only be realised with substantial changes at all levels of the education system. Clearly, improving the quality of teaching, and the subject knowledge of teachers is central. But the project also recognized that unless teachers receive adequate support and monitoring and unless schools are basically stable institutions, the best programmes to improve teachers' subject knowledge and teaching competence would have limited impact. As such,

QLP focused on improving management at school level. Just as changes in teaching practice would be unlikely without regular and substantial support and pressure from school managers, school managers themselves require both capacity building and monitoring to play their role in the chain of improvement. At the top of the process, district offices must (1) provide adequate administrative services to prevent schools becoming distracted by the late delivery of stationery or the non-payment of teachers and (2) monitor school management teams to ensure that they are accountable for school performance. In the QLP, district development activities were not designed as stand-alone components, but were integral to a wide 'systemic' strategy.

The expected outcomes of the district level activities provide a good sense of the underlying theory of accountability and capacity- building. The external service providers to districts were tasked with improving the district offices' capacity to plan and manage particularly human resources and finances, to monitor schools, and to develop a repertoire to provide educational support to schools. These broad outcomes were further broken down into specific tasks, such as helping districts develop internal organograms, job descriptions, management and budget plans, and plans to improve maths and languages, and put in place education management information systems. Alongside these tasks the NGOs working with districts were required to put in place procedures for the district officials to monitor schools.

### **5. SQIP in Empangeni: Mentoring Superintendents**

The School Quality Improvement Project (SQIP) emerged out of the weaknesses of a small- scale school improvement initiative in KZN. Although Promat provided extensive support to schools in various initiatives, little progress was made because of the absence of monitoring and support by the district offices. The service providers recognised that if the district offices did not provide adequate basic services and support schools, no NGO intervention could succeed. On this basis, Promat developed a model to improve the quality of the district offices' services. The focus was dual: on improving the overall efficiency and responsiveness of the district office to routine administrative matters and on training district officials to monitor schools.

The project was divided into two parts, the District Office Development Programme (DODP) and the School Development Programme (SDP). The school component was necessary to ensure that monitoring processes could take place and to fulfil other provincial expectations.

The District Office Development Programme comprised five components: the development of district job descriptions and performance management systems; workshops on school effectiveness; training in school monitoring; the design of a district strategic plan; and the development of manuals for school systems and procedures. The activities focused on two priorities: making the district office more functional, and training and supporting the Superintendents of Education Management (SEM) in comprehensive school auditing.

The School Development Programme consisted of three activities: helping schools develop school development plans; training of SMTs and SGBs; and putting in place quality assurance system to help schools make sense of the Grades 3, 6 and 9 assessment results.

Much of the first year of the project was spent on carrying out preparatory activities such as consultation and ensuring buy-in at all levels, establishing systems in the district offices, and building administrative capacity. Improving the administrative functionality of the district office continued to be a focus in the second year, with training on EMIS, customer care, and placement of key systems and procedures (e.g. pigeonholes in the district office for schools to ensure effective communication). In the second year, however, the real focus of the programme was on training SEM to monitor or inspect the schools - referred to as school audit training. This training process had six stages.

The audit process is a complex one. It requires the SEMs to engage in five or six school visits. During the visits the SEMs will have to practice various procedures and skills such as collecting evidence on the school's administration and leaderships, pastoral care and quality of teaching and learning offered by the school. The audit procedures and skills cannot be mastered in a once-off workshop. The SEMs will also need ongoing support and coaching whilst conducting the audits and the post audit activities.

SQIP, 2002

- Stage 1. Consultation with the school principal
- Stage 2. Consultation with the school staff
- Stage 3. School Audit
- Stage 4. Drafting an audit report
- Stage 5. Consulting with the school's stakeholder
- Stage 6. School Development Planning

The key principles of the project were accountability, legitimacy and self-reliance. The accountability principle included the standard of the services provided by the district office, particularly the administrative services such as appointments and procurement. The audit process was instrumental to rebuilding school accountability. The project also hoped to restore the legitimacy of the district officials through the establishment of a systematic, transparent and useful system of auditing, and ensuring that the officials used the system effectively. While it was hoped that the project would facilitate a level of self-reliance, this proved to be far more complex than originally anticipated.

SQIP put in place the preconditions for improvement, without directly stressing classroom improvement itself, except where standards could lead to improvement. Much of the programme focuses on rebuilding the district offices and training the superintendents to audit and monitor. While the very act of monitoring can lead to improvement, as it focuses the institutions' attention on new standards of practice, without additional capacity- building around weaknesses identified in the audit change tends to be at the most basic level.

Another observation relates to the loose coupling of three types of data in the programme. The district administrative systems improvement would put in place more adequate mechanisms to monitor personnel and procurement in terms of the line function of the administrators in the district office. The auditing process would provide rich data on systems and procedures both - administrative and teaching and learning - in schools. The learner assessment would provide good information on performance. What is missing is a mechanism to put the three data sets together and make use of them collectively for improvement purposes. See, for example, the KPT.

## **6. Eastern Cape Education Department: Decentralised District Office Model**

In the Eastern Cape an approach to district development has emerged out of a partnership between the Delta Foundation and the Eastern Cape Department of Education. Whereas most district development initiatives focus on improving systems and capacity, with recent inclusion of aspects of accountability, the Delta Foundation's recommendations focus on systems, structures and staffing that would bring service delivery closer to the school community. The model, developed by a task team comprising representatives from the Department of Education and the Delta Foundation, was conceived within the spirit of the *South African Schools Act*. The team assumed that new district offices should facilitate the devolution of authority, resources, decision-making and accountability to the lowest level.

Like Promat, the Delta Foundation came to district development from experience in a small-scale school improvement project in the Eastern Cape. While schools began to shift with the support of external service providers, the Delta Foundation recognised that large-scale change and institutionalisation of change would require district involvement. The Delta Foundation believed that district offices needed to be fundamentally re-engineered.

Recognising this, the task team arrived at a new decentralised district office model plus an implementation plan. Decentralised district offices would need to direct the transformation of schools by bringing key services, support and monitoring closer to clients.

Central to the model is the notion of an 'ideal school'. The task team adopted a bottom-up approach that began with the question, "What kind of office would best support schools as they are envisaged in the legislation?" At the heart of its recommendation is a call for the establishment of a new support structure situated near to schools. This new structure would comprise a powerful, small, interdisciplinary team servicing a small cluster of schools supported by a strong district office providing corporate services. To make a meaningful impact on schools, the Delta Proposal recommendations included substantial increases in the number of education specialists providing support to schools.

The role of the Delta Foundation was to do the original model and to provide support in terms of an implementation plan, with funding and logistics to be taken on by the Department itself. The Delta Foundation model is currently being piloted in five circuits in five districts in the Eastern Cape.

## **7. SSDP in Soshanguve: Backward Mapping**

Link Community Development, perhaps more than any other NGO working in the area of district development has meticulously grown a 'model', referred to as the Soshanguve School Development Planning model. The model was originally developed in Soshanguve, and refined and disseminated under DDSP in the Kimberley District of the Northern Cape and in districts in Ghana and Uganda.

At the heart of the SSDP district development model is an integrated planning process in which districts begin to plan around school needs. In the most recent version of the SSDP model, as implemented in Kimberley, the process begins at the district level, where the district office identifies its capacities and translates them into a Delivery Statement. Each unit of the district office lists the types of activities that

they could deliver to schools in order to assist them to improve. As the district officials work through the development of these Delivery Statements, they begin to reconceptualise their relationship to the schools.

Armed with the Delivery Statements and training provided by the LCD, the district officials begin to support schools in development planning. A specific framework is used to ensure that the schools do not focus on resource but genuinely engage with the real issues of the school. Once the SDP is completed, a copy is forwarded to the district office. At the district office, teams review the plans and return them with comments for further refinement. The district office then analyses what schools have identified as their service needs, and begin to plan according to the priorities. Rigorous planning tools are used to ensure that what is required is what is delivered. The outcome of this cycle in the process is a district plan.

The district planning documents become the basis for all activities in the district office. Just as schools have identified their own priorities, so does the district office. On completion of the district plan, it is forwarded to the provincial head office to indicate the types of support the district office will be requiring.

Prew (2002b) suggests that this 'backward mapping' approach, in which the entire planning process for the province is grounded in school needs, has begun to shift the values and style of the provincial department. Head office officials have begun to understand that their role is to respond to districts, rather than the other way around. It has also influenced the structure of the organisations as districts increasingly found it necessary to re-organise to meet the actual needs of the school.

## LEARNING LESSONS

Drawing on the international literature and experience in the South African context we can summarise the main insights as nine lessons:

**Lesson One:            Make certain of the problem that district development is designed to solve**

Perhaps one of the most important lessons that has been learned from various district development initiatives is that each project has chosen to define the problem of district development in its own way. Using McKinsey's Seven S's as a tool we can make sense of the relationship between the definition of the problem and the set of chosen activities. For example, the SEED project defined the problem in terms of organisational values and style and in so doing focused its attention on building a learning organisation and democratic management practices. SQIP focused on systems and skills. Delta Foundation has focused on structure and staffing, DDSP on systems and skills. What makes the SSDP project significant is that it focused on strategy. Integrated development planning shifted the 'strategy' of the district office from fulfilling head office instructions to responding to schools service needs.

In some instances, projects that focus on building systems and developing skill often

### A TOOL TO ANALYSE PROJECTS

McKinsey, a consulting organisation, examines an organisation's internal strengths and weaknesses by focusing on seven internal factors.

1. **Strategy.** A coherent set of actions directed at achieving sustainable advantage over the competitors, and allocation of resources.
2. **Structure.** The organisation chart that shows how tasks are divided and integrated and who reports to whom.
3. **Systems.** The formal means by which the company performs such critical functions as budgeting, work processes, information management, and performance management.
4. **Style.** The symbols and behaviours of management, which suggests what it believes should be emphasised and what is considered to be important.
5. **Staffing.** The demographics of who is in the organisation, why have they been hired, and how long have they been around.
6. **Skills.** The special capabilities that the organisation has, what it is able to do best. The skills of the whole organisation should be greater than the sum of individual skills.
7. **Shared values.** These go beyond the vision and mission statements, to include actual attitudes that motivate employees.

do so without first confronting the problem of structure and staffing. In many cases this is inevitable, as the external service provider has limited control over these components of the organisation. Unfortunately, the neglect of prior problems may jeopardise the project. While the inclination is often to focus on tangible components such as structure, skills, systems and staffing, real issues related to strategy are often neglected. The overarching strategic thinking around districts is often fuzzy and even contradictory.

**Lesson Two: Ensure that district development initiatives are carefully aligned: Coherence means both internal and external, vertical and horizontal**

One of the central arguments that has been made in recent years in the literature on educational change is that systemic improvement is only possible when instruments of change, i.e. policies or programmes, cohere or align. Advocates of notions of coherence argue, for instance, that in order to get substantial gains in learner achievement across an entire education system, it is essential to align policy/and or programmes such as teacher development, curriculum frameworks, assessment procedures and standards, as well as learning support materials toward a specific target. (Cohen and Spillane, 1993) While disagreement has emerged over whether alignment at a policy level will automatically be experienced at school level (Clune, 1995), the notion of coherence has gained wide currency. De Clercq (2002) has introduced a useful distinction between vertical and horizontal coherence, with vertical coherence focusing on the issues of governance and management, and horizontal coherence on curriculum and instruction.

For our purposes it is important to recognise that for district development programmes to be successful, they must pay attention to both vertical and horizontal alignment. Questions such as, “Are the programmes aligned to major provincial policy or organisational developments such as bureaucratic restructuring?” can reveal a great deal about why an initiative is successful. However, alignment in and of itself is no guarantor of success, as a recent event around Whole School Evaluation and school auditing in the SQIP programme has revealed. In that case, the project had to consciously distance itself from the official state policy in order to ensure ‘buy-in’ at school level. QLP self-consciously designed its model around a strong vertical alignment, focusing on all levels of the change process. However, it is important to note that the activities at district level have only indirect bearing on the targets of improving maths and language results. Put another way, the district - and to some extent the school management activities - are necessary conditions for improvement in marks, but are not directly focused on them.

**Lesson Three: Grow a range of district development models: Pay attention to the fit between context and model**

A standard criticism of education improvement projects, whether school or district focused, is that the outside service providers, whether state- or NGO- driven, come with a single intervention strategy that is designed for all schools and all districts. While lip service is paid to adapting the project to local circumstances or needs, the reality is that most service providers simply do not have the time or the capacity to develop a thorough analysis of each site, and then develop a customised solution. What this means is that the attempt to deal with the specificity of each site tends to be superficial.

There is, however, a deeper issue around the ‘one-size-fits-all’ problem that relates to making judgements about the particular developmental needs of a school or district. While each institution is unique, it is clear that given common histories and contexts, institutions cluster around key variables. As such, common types of interventions would be appropriate. For example, Slavin (1998) and Hopkins (1998) have identified three types of schools, namely “profoundly dysfunctional”, “functioning but low performance”, and “good”. Scholars tend to agree that specific types of interventions work best for specific types of schools. Profoundly dysfunctional schools require either closure or a highly intensive and directive intervention.

Schools that have the appearance of stability but are not providing the kind of ambitious learning outcomes envisaged may require structured curriculum and pedagogy support.

If we stretch the analogy, then we would suggest that depending on the nature of the problems in a district, specific types of interventions are required. In the United States for example, courts have ordered state education departments to take over school districts where the districts have failed to fulfil their constitutional mandates. While this may be appropriate action only in a small number of cases, and only after remedial actions have failed, it does point to one particular type of approach. Closer to home, it has been pointed out that the district development models that are driven by an education management information system may only be effective where a basic level of capacity and functionality has been achieved. In the SQIP project, the model of training superintendents worked well in Empangeni and Eshowe, but has been less successful in Pongola. Like remote districts in the Eastern Cape, the district office struggled to recruit experienced staff and continues to run under capacity. Until underlying problems are resolved, the model of training of superintendents in school auditing is likely to fail.

### **Lesson Four: Build deep partnership: Address the problems associated with externally-driven initiatives**

Although the donor-funded, externally-managed programmes included in this paper tend to pay a great deal of attention to participant 'buy-in', the problem of ownership remains. Experience suggests that district officials tended to distance themselves from outside interventions. What generally seems to occur is that the projects are introduced by provincial governments as part of agreements between funders and provincial departments. Head office officials make decisions about which project will be assigned to a region or district. District officials are merely informed about the assignment of a project. Although service providers encourage district officials to identify their own developmental needs, government officials often perceive external service providers as an extra burden on their already heavy work load or, at best, extra capacity that can relieve them of some of their responsibilities. There is little sense that the district development project is 'their' project, and that they must conceptualise it, develop plans for it, take charge of implementation and that they are ultimately accountable for its success or failure. In the cases of projects that have overcome this problem, they have done so by the force of their presence, i.e. by being located in the district offices on a full time basis.

Internally-driven projects by definition do not face this specific problem. However they face another equally vexing problem. As the Benoni/Brakpan project shows, (confirmed in Spillane, 1997) internally-driven projects require a high level of both human and social capital to start with. District officials need to be prepared to take risks and need to have social links within and outside the district in order to be effective.

### **Lesson Five: Use data to drive improvement**

Projects like DDSP and QLP are beginning to use data to drive improvement practices. Overall, however, the use of data for improvement purposes has a long way to go in district improvement projects. The underlying question is, "How does using data lead to improvement?". We can conceive of it in at least two different ways. Firstly, data helps service providers; districts and schools identify gaps,



weaknesses or problems previously missed in self-assessment exercises. It can help them plan more strategically and monitor change.

For example, the analysis of pass rates in one of the DIP projects (GDE, 2001), supported by other work (Simkins, 2002), showed that weakness in specific subjects can explain aggregate underachievement as much of the problem of failing schools as institutions. This kind of data interpretation has allowed for the development of targeted interventions with high, short-term impact, as in the case of the Maths Centre's mathematics strategy in De Aar.

Data can also be used for accountability purposes. In the literature on performance-based accountability (Furhman, 1999), the use of data for improvement via accountability works because results help schools and districts to focus attention, set goals to be achieved, and in some cases become part of a system of rewards and sanctions.

For data to be effective as an instrument of change, however, it must saturate schools or districts. Unfortunately, save for the matric examination results, there is little practice or achievement data available that has become part of daily practice. While information on classroom practice is useful, it lacks the gravity and immediacy of learner test scores. Initiatives to increase the range of learner achievement data from Grades 3, 6 and 9 system assessments will begin to address this problem, as long as that information provides insights into aggregate classroom level and school level performance. Notwithstanding its centrality in overall district and school improvement, data-driven improvement initiatives that rely on standardised systemic assessment results contain their own sets of dangers (Linn, 2001).

While effective use of data for efficient resource planning and for accountability has been recognised, the challenge lies in how to institutionalise the practices. As Harvey (2002) notes, future district capacity-building agendas must strongly integrate training in the use of database systems. Historically, much of this capacity has been defined as a head office function, with most of the capacity having gone to EMIS units in provincial offices.

For districts to use data for improvement, they need to have the capacity to:

- Develop relevant indicators
- Collect high quality data based on these indicators
- Do efficient data entry
- Do the data analysis and generate reports
- Interpret the reports for planning delivery

Harvey (2002)

### **Lesson Six: Combine the tools of pressure and support to focus on change**

Thinking about educational development has been moved forward substantially by the recognition that institutional change, i.e. improvement in teachers' practice and learner achievement requires more than additional resources, capacity building, empowerment or restructuring. Support or capacity building only works in conjunction with pressure or accountability. While high stakes accountability in the form of threats to close schools seem to have only limited impact (Mintrop, 2002), other accountability practices have shown themselves to be successful (Elmore & Furhman, 2001).

At the core of the idea of pressure and support is the theory that organisations are by nature conservative or averse to change. Merely providing additional resources or capacity does not alter the underlying culture of the organisation, as it merely adjusts to or accommodates external threats. Without concerted external expectation of change, without clear targets or outcomes to be achieved, and without rewards and sanctions associated with the achievement of these targets, institutions seldom sustain change. If districts are provided with (1) adequate resources to change; (2) clear and realistic targets to be achieved; (3) if they can expect to face substantial sanctions if they do not achieve the targets; and (4) if they receive rewards if they do, then change is more likely.

At the most superficial level, the idea of pressure and support can be used as a gauge to judge projects. Have they incorporated in some form or other both pressure and support, or accountability and capacity building? For understandable reasons in the recent past, the emphasis had been on capacity- building and empowerment in most improvement initiatives. This seems true of the district development projects. However, some have attempted to move cautiously to try and incorporate some aspect of accountability. In particular, QLP has conceived of the assessment of performance as part of the accountability process. However, two problems remain. First the assessment is not rapid enough with feedback going to the participants who are supposed to account for change, i.e. the district offices and the schools. Second, there are only weak systems of rewards and no sanctions.

A complicating factor is that the external providers are structurally unable to hold either the district or the school to account. They are the external supplier, not the employer and as such lack the legal authority to back hard accountability.

### **Lesson Seven: Accountability instruments used sensibly need to be tools of change**

What types of accountability work? We can talk about at least two forms, performance-based accountability and the older forms of bureaucratic accountability (Darling-Hammond, 1989). During the past decade, performance-based accountability has emerged as the dominant form. In essence, systems are measured by how well learners perform on systemic assessment. This kind of accountability has a number of advantages. First and most basic, it measures the system on the basis of what is core, learner achievement. It forces a focus on that which matters most. In the South African context, with the history of matriculation results and their high stakes consequences for learners, all stakeholders are familiar with and accept the legitimacy of the principle of performance-based accountability.

The problem with performance-based accountability for system-wide improvement is that it requires high quality systemic testing across all phases on an annual basis. The process of building a culture of systemic assessment is still in its infancy and if the Ontario experience is anything to go by, where no expense was spared in a high capacity assessment system, it takes five or more years for people to accept the results, at system level, institutional level, and at an individual level. The other obvious concern has to do with perverse incentives. We have seen this very clearly in the EAZ study, where schools use exclusionary practices to boost results (Fleisch, 2002).

The alternative to performance accountability is bureaucratic accountability. This is associated with the traditions of inspection and bureaucratic rule compliance. This approach has attracted considerable criticism. However in recent years there is a

growing reconsideration of the role of inspection (Chubb, 2001). While it is very costly and requires high levels of trust, both of which are in short supply in South Africa, it has an unintended positive consequence that may be central for district improvement projects. Why do school inspections, auditing or whole school evaluation work? The reasons are counter-intuitive. High quality inspection, with adequate follow-up, is in fact a form of capacity-building. This is an important lesson learned from those projects that have worked hard at developing districts' capacities to audit, inspect or evaluate schools.

Smith & O'Day (1993) have suggested that well developed standards for inputs, practices, and performance as part of a system of accountability work in three ways. The standards, once well understood and publicised with audits of organisations against those standards, would lead to (1) self-generated improvement, (2) external pressure for improvement, and (3) hard accountability in terms of rewards and sanctions. Just having clear sets of standards that organisations are measured against is perhaps the most powerful force for change. In the cases where schools or districts fail to meet the standards, pressure from parents or other stakeholders often comes into play, either directly through governing bodies or through parent choice. Finally, improvement through accountability against standards can work through traditional bureaucratic sanctions such as review of employment contracts.

### **Lesson Eight: Capacity- building requires a theory of learning**

This leads into the theories of learning implicit in the district development projects. The notion of capacity-building needs to be unpacked. In general we can see three conceptions of capacity- building in district development projects: (1) capacity-building as empowerment, (2) capacity- building as transmission of knowledge and skills, and (3) capacity- building as learning. The first assumes that the fundamental institutional problem is authoritarianism, and thus through processes of empowerment, capacity will be built through self-actualisation. The second concept of capacity- building as a process of transmission is exemplified in the approach to curriculum training. This approach assumes that a discrete body of knowledge exists that can be simply transferred from one person to another. The final notion of capacity- building as learning assumes that the learning process involves a learner moving through a zone of development from novice to expert. This process requires the novice to have access to extensive scaffolding in the form of modelling of new practice, collaborative work with an expert, opportunities to practise under the supervision of an expert, gradually leading to full responsibility as the novice becomes more competent and confident.

Many of the best district development projects have begun to move towards the third model of capacity- building. This particular model is particularly appropriate for the development of capacity to undertake school audits/evaluations. While the third conception of capacity- building is likely to have the greatest impact, it is also the most expensive.

### **Lesson Nine: The external service provider sector needs strengthening**

Reflecting on the lessons of district development, it would be remiss to ignore the problems within the NGO providers sector. As the demand for improved delivery gathers momentum, so has the demand on NGOs to become service providers on a mass scale. To fit into pre-existing programmes with tight timeframes, NGOs are

forced to expand without having time to do adequate training of new staff, or time to test new materials and training approaches.

In Prew's view (2002) NGOs cannot and should not be at the core of the delivery process. He believes that as a sector it has contracted dramatically since 1994, and as such can and should primarily involve itself in innovation. Graham-Jolly and Peacock (2000) point to another, more serious, paradox associated with NGO's work. In the Thousand Schools Project (TSP) that was to be the flagship of large-scale, school-by-school improvement projects in South Africa, they found that NGOs that were contracted to provide services were reluctant to invest heavily in research and development for each and every new assignment. As a result, the NGO's services tended to draw on the basket of activities and materials that had been previously used in other projects. This *ad hoc* arrangement undermined the overall coherence of the new project, particularly as experienced at institutional level.

Hatch (2000) has identified an additional organisational paradox associated with NGO innovations. While few stakeholders or individuals within an organisation are satisfied with levels of functionality, the risks associated with high-end innovations are often too great. These innovations create unsatisfactory levels of uncertainty in environments characterised as unpredictable. He argues that the solution must be a middle ground between preserving existing practices and radical organisational change.

Table 3. Risks and Options to District Development

Outcomes	Risks	Possible Options
More effective functioning of district offices	During the past three years, most of the provinces have gone through extremely disruptive restructuring exercises that have particularly impacted upon the former regional offices and circuit offices. Not only have large numbers of staff been redeployed, but roles and functions have changed as have systems. In provinces such as the Eastern Cape and KZN, departments have experienced difficulties in recruiting experienced staff to the more remote district offices. Serious concerns have also been expressed about the expertise of some of the district officials that have recently been employed.	The Delta Foundation proposal may go some of the way to address this problem. In particular, the proposal calls for a radical rethinking of the ratio of support/ monitoring staff in the district/circuit to schools. The overall shift in almost all provinces from the former DET system of separating circuit management and subject advisory services to integrated teams is likely to improve provision, particularly if sufficient numbers of district staff are employed.
More effective school support	Along with the service delivery dip that followed the departmental restructuring process, much of the ineffectiveness of district administrative systems can be attributed to weak or non-	While no district development programmes can claim to have addressed this problem in a comprehensive way, the School Quality Improvement Project has prioritised district administrative systems, procedures and skills.

## What Works in District Development

	<p>existent systems, poor training specifically on those systems, and inadequate supervision. This has resulted in serious weakness in delivery of procurement and personnel services, which in turn undermine the 'image' of the district.</p>	<p>Effectively utilised information technology, built around improved systems, can be a very important component of the change process.</p>
<p>More effective school monitoring</p>	<p>One of the most complex and difficult of all aspects of district development is how to get district staff to play their role in school accountability. Given the history and current resistance, it is extremely difficult to shift practices.</p>	<p>The SQUIP project has approached this through both a well thought out strategy and one-on-one modelling and mentoring. However, in the absence of ongoing accountability from above, it is unlikely to be sustained beyond the life of this project. The KTP project led by LCD may provide additional insights. The emphasis on comprehensive sets of indicators in a locally controlled database with strong interpretive skills may be key in breaking down patterns of resistance as it may provide an independent evidence system.</p>
<p>More effective school development planning</p>	<p>There is a risk that the school development planning process could become a trite, symbolic activity that does not guide the school's wider objectives.</p>	<p>The SSDP and KTP may provide some insights about how to avoid this problem. First, with the district delivery statement, schools have very strict and realistic parameters to work within in terms of what they can expect from district offices. Second, the service providers provide both a template and act as 'critical friends' to guard against what they refer to as resource priorities. Finally, with better and more frequent reliable data on actual performance, schools will be forced to engage with realistic and meaningful planning.</p>

## **CONCLUSION**

The descriptions of district development programme models in relation to the literature on effective change suggest that there is a gap between knowledge of best practice and current project designs. While some projects clearly show the way forward, we cannot say much about whether programme models actually work (i.e. improve schools or increase learner achievement), or which programme models work better than their alternatives. In addition to reliable and valid findings about the effects of these programme models we also need to know more about efficacy of replication. Often models work when implemented by their designers, but fail when they go to scale. Finally, information on effects and replication is not in and of itself enough - we need to know a great deal about programme model costs and cost-effectiveness (Levin, 2001). In many instances the actual cost of programmes is not known. We also need to understand the tradeoffs between different kinds of interventions to improve districts such as restructuring, increasing the numbers of staff, and improved training and infrastructure.

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**APPENDIX**

1. THE BRIEF

The consultant provide a thorough assessment, including description and analysis of the district development interventions to development models with the best prospect of improving performance and distil from good practice drawing from practical experience and sound advice from experts on the subject.

The paper would:

- Identify District Development Programmes being currently implemented in the country or immediate past.
- Scan the design and methodology of the different programmes but also taking into cognisance of recent institutional changes in the different provinces
- Scan recent literature, research or discussion papers on the subject.