

Creating a Caring School

A Guide for School Management Teams with Accompanying Toolkit

Writers

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A Guide for School Management Teams with an Accompanying Toolkit

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Cover Photograph

- Saxonwold Primary School, Johannesburg, Gauteng

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INTRODUCTION

Background

HIV and AIDS prevalence and its effect in South Africa

South Africa is currently experiencing one of the most severe AIDS epidemics in the world with more than five million (or an estimated 11%) of the overall population living with HIV. The total number of new HIV infections for 2009 is estimated at 413 000. Of these, an estimated 60 000 will be among children (Statistics SA: 2009)¹. For each person living with HIV, the impact is felt not only by the infected person, but also in the lives of their families, friends and wider communities, thus significantly multiplying the effect.

What does all this mean for education?

Carol Coombe, a prominent South African HIV and AIDS specialist, has highlighted the impact of HIV and AIDS on education. The following is a summary of some of the worrying ways in which this impact is manifested.

Learners

Fewer children enrol in school because HIV+ mothers die young; children are ill and dying of AIDS complications; many families are impoverished; and many children are orphaned or caring for younger children, or are trying to scrape together a meager living – they therefore stay out of school. These conditions also generally lead to increased absenteeism; withdrawal from school to care for others; lower educational performance; and premature termination of education all of which result in fewer vocational opportunities.

Teachers

Qualified teachers and officials are lost to education through death or illness.

School effectiveness

Where a significant proportion of teachers, officials and children are ill, lacking morale, and unable to concentrate, a decline in school effectiveness is likely to occur.

The schooling system

Management, administration and financial control in the education system are already fragile; HIV and AIDS are likely to make it even more difficult to sustain the structures necessary to provide formal education of the scope and quality envisioned by the government's policies.

These aspects are all very worrying because, ultimately, they signify a real reversal of development gains (achieved since 1994) and further development will be more difficult. Current education development goals (including the Millennium Development Goals and Education for All) will be unattainable within the foreseeable future (adapted from Coombe 2000: 16).²

In the context of this epidemic, we need to acknowledge that we are behind in our responses and consequently must manage the results of this epidemic while trying to put in place the counter measures required for the longer term. An effective education sector response to HIV and AIDS is required. To date, much of the focus has been on preventing HIV and AIDS and little attention has been given to the question of how best to support those people who are HIV+ or whose lives are affected by HIV and AIDS. A range of questions need to be asked and answered. For example, how best can the wellness of the teachers be supported? What systems need to be put in place to ensure that teaching and learning continue, even if teachers are absent? How can learners who are absent be enabled to continue learning? What systems exist in schools for supporting vulnerable learners? A new planning and management paradigm for mitigating the influence of the spreading epidemic on the education system is required.

Given this situation, the South African Institute for Distance Education (SAIDE) embarked on a research project with the aim of developing a practical approach to managing the impact of HIV and AIDS in schools in diverse contexts.

As this project commenced, one of the first activities SAIDE undertook was a survey of existing initiatives aimed at mitigating the impact of HIV and AIDS on schooling. We established that many such projects existed. We found that, typically, the Department of Education initiatives seemed to mainly focus on training around interpretation of HIV and AIDS and Inclusive Education Policy. Many non-government, community and faith based organisations working in the education sector focussed on a range of interventions. These included practical interventions from support to schools on how to develop food gardens to short training workshops for teachers on how to identify and support vulnerable learners as well as inputs on HIV and AIDS prevention amongst others. We found that there were many good projects dotted all around the country, some small and localised and some large scale initiatives that were province wide and, in some cases, some even intended for national implementation.

The nature, duration and quality of the interventions varied greatly. We found many instances of short, two or three day training workshops, but it soon became clear that these were not sufficient to build the kind of capacity that is needed to deal with the large challenges created by the impact of HIV and AIDS on education. We found a number of pilot projects that had been implemented, often for a year or so, but without ever being properly evaluated. The strengths and weaknesses of these pilot projects were therefore never fully assessed and as a result many valuable lessons were lost. Many of these projects became once-off events, rather than providing the impetus for sustained development.

SAIDE's next research activity was a scan of schools to review school-based care and support initiatives. Many were found, but most frequently these were of an informal nature, carried out by individual teachers who had been personally moved to do something by the plight of vulnerable learners. We came across numerous examples of individual teachers bringing food to school to feed hungry learners. We found cases of teachers paying for a learner's school fees or uniform. We even found evidence of teachers fostering orphans. But by their very nature, these are not initiatives that can be implemented school-wide and turned into systematised programmes of action. Despite the importance of these caring initiatives, again, questions about sustainability need to be raised.

We found numerous schools struggling to support vulnerable learners without receiving any sustained support, either from the department of education or from any other organisations. This meant that in many cases, where interventions were made, they were not systematically implemented, well managed or sustainable.

But we did not believe that the situation was hopeless. Next, SAIDE approached the various provincial departments of education, the teacher unions and some NGOs and asked them to help us identify examples of good school-based care and support for vulnerable learners. We visited schools across seven provinces and recorded the examples of good practice that we found. Based on the evidence that we have collected on implementation of manageable strategies and good management practice, we have seen how schools *can* and *do* make a difference. We found pockets of excellence in the remotest rural areas as well as in inner city and township schools. Our research convinced us that all schools have the potential to slowly and systematically put into place measures that will help them become sites of care and support.

We have used the findings of our research to develop this guide and the companion toolkit. We hope that the many valuable lessons distilled will serve as a practical guide to help school principals and their management teams (SMTs) to manage the health and social needs of children infected and affected by HIV and AIDS or made vulnerable for other reasons.

Approach used in this guide and toolkit

An integrated approach is used to think about support

In response to the multifaceted nature of the effects of HIV and AIDS, the approach used in this guide is an integrated one. Those whose lives are affected may need to be supported in a range of ways. For example, learners may need support of a physical nature, in the form of nutrition and medical care, but they may also require support with school work and psycho-social support. Whereas it may not be possible to offer a whole range of support services from the outset, schools need to consider a range of interventions and think about a phased-in or incremental approach to implementing these.

This guide also acknowledges that it is difficult for any school to manage the number of social and economic challenges that present themselves on its own. External support needs to be sought. This requires the school leadership and management to develop strategies for harnessing assistance from a variety of organisations outside of the school. SAIDE therefore recognises the importance of school management building its capacity to set up networks of support as a method of achieving necessary external assistance.

Inclusive understanding of vulnerability

How does SAIDE understand the notion of vulnerability? Many organisations, both inside and outside of South Africa, involved with providing support and care to vulnerable children (the Children's Institute, Soul City, Save the Children, MIET(A) and large international agencies like UNICEF) adhere to an inclusive definition of 'vulnerability'. The definition used by these organisations includes children made vulnerable by HIV and AIDS or by *any other* socio-economic causes such as poverty, physical or sexual abuse, alcohol and drug abuse etc. The South African Education White Paper 6 *Special Needs Education: Building an Inclusive Education and Training System*, (DoE: 2001)³ also defines 'vulnerability' in this broad and inclusive way, characterising HIV and AIDS as being just one among many barriers to learning.

This raised the question for SAIDE as to what our approach should be. How narrow or wide a definition of vulnerability should we adopt? Should we focus our research only on supporting learning affected by HIV and AIDS or should we include all vulnerable learners in our investigation into various care and support strategies?

We eventually agreed that while it remained important to maintain a focus on HIV and AIDS, we would do so within the wider context of *inclusive* education.

How is the role of school management conceptualised?

Educational policy in South Africa is largely premised on the notion that the school principal and the school management team (SMT) should provide leadership and management both in the school and beyond the school walls - in the broader community. (See the South African Schools Act 1996⁴ and the National Policy for HIV and AIDS for Learners and Educators in Public Schools 1999.)⁵

Our research confirmed the existence of an extremely wide spectrum of schools in South Africa with very varying management capacity and resources dependant largely on the context in which schools are located. It is therefore unlikely that it would be possible to develop a management approach that would suit all schools. Instead, the strategies proposed in this guide are intended to assist principals and SMTs to think about and plan the approaches that are most appropriate to their school and context.

Focus on learners

The research undertaken to inform the development of this guide was intended initially to focus on good practice in supporting both learners and teachers who are affected by the HIV and AIDS epidemic. However as our research progressed, it became more and more obvious that while there were many initiatives to support learners, there was very little evidence of care or support initiatives aimed at teachers who were infected or affected by HIV and AIDS. The one exception that SAIDE came across is the Education Labour Relations Council (ELRC) Prevention Care and Treatment Action (PCTA) programme. The lack of good practice in this field has meant that we were not able to write up information on teacher care and support. Teacher care and support is therefore, unfortunately, not a focus areas of this guide. We do however encourage all schools to get involved in the PCTA programme which is available nationally and to be proactive in their support of their teachers. **More information about the PCTA programme is available in the resource section of the Toolkit.**

Use of sketches and case studies

The 'sketches' included in this guide are based on the actual case studies undertaken as part of the SAIDE research. (School names and the names of school principals have been changed.) The 'sketches' demonstrate the range of leadership competences demonstrated by school leaders in a range of schools that was selected to be part of this research project. They reflect the richness and variety of the leadership styles observed during the research and serve to illustrate that reasonable and 'doable' responses to this crisis are possible, even in the most poorly resourced schools.

Purpose of this guide and toolkit

Schools conceptualised as centres of care and support

One of the important lessons learnt in our research has been that a new paradigm for schools needs to become entrenched – one in which schools are conceptualised as centres of care and support. This notion is not a new one; rather, it is well rooted in existing policy. The need to make the shift from a narrow focus on what schools do and how they are led, to the notion of schools as centres of care and support becomes urgent when one takes cognisance of the number of orphans and vulnerable children as evidenced in this research sample alone. The challenge is to give realisable, practical expression to existing policy.

Thus, while retaining their emphasis on teaching and learning, schools need to focus on a few well chosen interventions. This study suggests that basic nutrition, aftercare and support with school work, and psycho-social support are preconditions for successful learning and teaching to take place. Schools will therefore be required to build supportive networks to:

- better manage, strengthen and expand the current provincial nutrition programmes;
- establish aftercare facilities; and
- manage psycho-social support and referral services.

The expanded role of school leadership

The concept of the school being expanded to become a centre of care and support inevitably results in a related expansion of the role of the school leadership. New responsibilities will have to be assumed. In summary, these roles and responsibilities include SMTs having to be knowledgeable and skilled at identifying and mobilising resources within the school and beyond, which enables them to set up and sustain programmes for orphans and vulnerable learners; willing to take on more explicit mentoring and management roles in relation to staff; and providing oversight for setting up of simple, effective information management system for tracking vulnerable learners.

The need for professional development with a different emphasis

It is likely that many principals and SMT members will themselves lack these kinds of skills and require a different form of capacity building from that currently offered to school leaders. This has implications for the type of continuing professional development needed. While the DoE is acknowledged for developing the Advanced Certificate in Education in Leadership and Management for school principals, the current content of this programme is not responsive to the type of needs described here. In fact, as it presently stands, the programme does not have a module dealing with support for vulnerable learners nor with any other aspect of managing the impact of HIV and AIDS in schools.

Having identified this gap in current professional development provision, SAIDE recognised the need for further professional support specifically aimed at helping school leadership to understand the issues and get to grips with some of the practicalities involved in managing a school in the environment of HIV and AIDS.

The idea of developing a management resource to support SMTs was born. To ensure the relevance of the materials, SAIDE embarked on an evidence-based research process which has directly fed into the development of this guide and toolkit.

While the content of this guide and toolkit do not lead to a formal qualification, a range of key competencies is covered. It is intended that the guide will be a useful curriculum support for providers seeking to offer qualifications to school management, as well as directly to those principals and members of management teams and teachers (especially in the Life Skills/ Life Orientation Learning Areas) who are interested in some professional development outside of a formal qualification.

The structure of the guide and toolkit

This resource is comprised of two companion components, the guide and the toolkit. The guide is intended to assist school leadership and management to understand why and how a particular strategy, method, or idea is useful, and not to be just a “how to” manual of tips. Yet the resource as a whole is at the same time intended to be relevant at all times to the context and practice of the school management team. Therefore, included in the toolkit component are realistic exemplars, check lists, and a set of information management tools that demonstrate approaches and methods for recording, planning, managing and monitoring implementation of a range of care and support interventions.

Content outline

Unit 1

How responsive are schools to the social challenges in South Africa today?

In this first unit we explore some of the main social and economic challenges that children face. We examine how these issues affect not only the children, their households and communities, but also the school. In acknowledging the significant challenges such as the impact of HIV and AIDS that schools managers face, we explore the following questions:

- Why is schooling important?
- What are the implications of these challenges for schools?
 - What is the role of the school in mitigating the impact of HV and AIDS?
 - What implications does this have for the role of school management?

Unit 2

Schools as centres of care

Against the backdrop of the broader South African education policy framework we attempt to create a vision of what a caring school might look like. In Unit 2 we:

- Explore how policy requires schools to respond to the effects of HIV and AIDS;
- Ask why there is a gap between policy and implementation;
- Identify the features of a caring school in which vulnerable children are supported and where they are enabled to grow and develop; and
- Explore the role that the school management team needs to play to create a caring and supportive school environment.

Unit 3

Care for vulnerable learners

In this unit we examine the meaning of the term *vulnerable* and reflect on the devastating effects that socio-economic issues such as HIV and AIDS, poverty and related challenges have on learners. We establish that regular attendance at school is critical for vulnerable learners since schools can provide them with the stability and support they need. In Unit 3 we explore:

- What makes learners vulnerable;
- How being vulnerable effects a learner's education;
- Why schools are important in the lives of vulnerable learners - the notion of schooling as a "social vaccine"; and
- How having a system for identifying and managing information about vulnerable learners enables management to use resources wisely and to plan appropriate support.

Unit 4

Networks of care and support

Having established that schools are critical role players in the national multisectoral strategy for combating the spread of HIV and AIDS infection and managing the effects of the epidemic in the local context, in Unit 4 we explore:

- The benefits of setting up networks of support as a method for delivering the school's overall support strategy;
- What types of support are available from state and other external organisations; and
- How to manage support networks to get optimum benefits for your school.

Unit 5

Good nutrition for learning

In this unit, we explore in some depth why the provision of nutritious food for vulnerable children should be a central concern for schools in general and for the principal and school management team in particular. Numerous examples from the field show the benefits of providing nutrition for those learners who are most vulnerable. In particular we explore:

- Why it is necessary for schools to get involved in managing a nutrition programme;
- The requirements and intended objectives of the National School Nutrition Programme; what difficulties schools experience with implementing it; how to strengthen the Nutrition Programme in schools where it exists; and
- How to assess your school nutrition needs in general and how to manage a nutrition programme effectively.

Unit 6

School-based aftercare for learners

Several aftercare initiatives we examined as part of the SAIDE research revealed the different ways in which aftercare programmes are set up and managed, the activities and support that are organised, the roles and responsibilities of school management, and the nature of the support provided by NGOs, government departments, businesses, parents and the community. In Unit 6 we explore:

- What the benefits of aftercare support for learners are;
- What types of aftercare support strategies can be organised;
- What is involved in managing school-based aftercare programmes; and
- Which aftercare strategy is likely to be most suitable for your school.

Unit 7

Counselling support for vulnerable learners

In this unit we establish that a learner's ability to participate fully in learning hinges as much on their emotional sense of well being as it does on their physical well being. We explore:

- What the benefits of counselling support for learners are;
- What types of counselling support strategies can be organised;
- What is involved in managing school-based counselling programmes; and
- Which counselling strategy is likely to be most suitable for your school.

Unit 8

Preparing a school care and support plan

In Unit 8 we pull together all the lessons of the previous seven units, applying what has been learnt to a practical planning exercise that culminates in the preparation of two linked plans: a strategic plan of priority goals to build your school as a centre of care and support, and action plans that deal with the more practical aspects (including funding) and provide the details of how you will achieve these goals. To achieve this in Unit 8 we examine:

- Where we want to be (vision for your school as a centre of care and hope);
- Where we are now (analysis of your present situation);
- How we will get to where we want to be (strategic plan comprising clear goals);
- What our priorities are (identification of priority and achievable goals); and
- What is involved in implementing a strategic goal (action plan that spells out details of actions to be taken).

Using this guide and toolkit

This guide operates as your “teacher”. Although you can work through it on your own, we strongly recommend rather that you work through it together with the members of the school management team (SMT), thereby setting up a community of practice (CoP)⁶. You may even consider pooling your efforts and working collaboratively with principals or SMTs from neighbouring schools.

The notion of developing communities of practice is one which has, since the early 1990s, been largely promoted by Etienne Wenger, an internationally recognised educational theorist and practitioner. He suggests that knowledge that is shared and learned in communities of practice is social capital. People connect at various levels and across departments, both internally and externally, of the school. As people connect with each other they are able to share their expertise and learn from other members. Benefits of learning and working together in this way include:

- Enhanced problem solving
- Developing new capabilities
- Leveraging best practices
- Standardising practices
- Time savings
- Increase in skills
- Avoiding mistakes
- Creating new knowledge.

Differently put, two heads are better than one!

The importance of active learning

Because we believe that new understandings depend on, and arise out of, action, we have designed this guide to include many activities that we hope you will complete. Like all good learning materials, this guide will work best if you engage systematically with the activities. If you do not do the activities you will miss out on the most important part of the learning pathway we have developed for you.

Thinking activities

At various points in the guide, we ask you to *stop and think* and to take some time to reflect on a particular issue. These thought pauses are designed to help you consolidate your understanding of a specific point before tackling the next section of the guide. They deliberately try to slow you down!

One of the habits many of us develop through our involvement in a *rote recall* kind of learning is that we rush through things. Once we have read something, we believe that we know it. This isn't true. While we may at first reading recognise the idea, we probably don't really understand it in any detail. Work through this guide slowly and thoughtfully. Read and think. This is how we develop a depth of understanding and become able to use the ideas we learn.

Try to link the issues raised in each thought pause with what you have read, with what you have already learnt about learning, with your own previous experience, and so on. Think about the problems we have raised. You might want to jot down your ideas in your workbook so that you can be reminded of them later.

Keeping a reference file for planning purposes

We strongly advise you to keep a file in which you keep all the activities, copies of completed tools and also notes you have made on any additional ideas that you and your team have as you work through this guide and toolkit. Apart from serving as a record of your thinking and development, the information in this file will form the basis of the planning that you undertake in Unit 8: Preparing a school care and support plan.

Contextualising the use of this guide

Schools are all at very different stages with regard to the implementation of care and support systems for vulnerable learners. Each school has to interpret and work within its own context. For some schools, strengthening the existing national nutrition programme may be a priority. For others it may be the challenge of establishing some or all components of an aftercare facility or setting up a referral system.

This guide is intended to alert you to, and help you to think about, a number of key issues involved in creating a caring school. It offers a framework for planning and suggests solutions. It also offers alternative approaches and provides a set of tools to help you implement a set of care and support strategies that are relevant to your context and needs. In all aspects it draws from the experience of South African schools that participated in the original SAIDE research and the strategies and approaches they are exploring.

We hope that this guide will be useful to all those entrusted with managing the care and support of vulnerable learners.