

Schools need savvy to raise standards

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SOUTH AFRICA has a huge education budget, but some schools will not be able to deliver results despite the resources and money allocated to it.

New research from Stellenbosch University has found a number of factors – including the quality of teachers, parental involvement and classroom practice – have to be in place at schools for them to improve their test results.

Debra Shepherd, a researcher and PhD student at the university, said yesterday the post-1994 government had done well to ensure all schools had basic resources. Despite this, pupils at historically black schools were found to perform far worse than their counterparts at historically white schools.

"It is about making the resources work. You could have the books in the classroom, but are the books being used?" Shepherd asked.

South Africa spends

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nearly 20 percent of the annual budget on education, with R190 billion allocated to the sector this year. The majority of this is spent on personnel.

Public spending on non-personnel costs for the poorest 20 percent of schools is about six times higher than expenditure on the richest 20 percent of schools.

"Historically, white schools significantly outperform historically black, and generally poorer, schools," Shepherd said.

Research had shown that overall lack of performance was mainly attributed to the under-performance of pupils in poorer, African-language schools.

Shepherd was speaking at a policy workshop where the results of recent re-

search on "low-quality education as a poverty trap" were discussed. The research was completed by the Social Policy Research Group at the university's Department of Economics.

Shepherd said it would be tempting to look at the characteristics of well-performing schools when formulating policies to improve poor school effectiveness. "But these may not necessarily translate into improved performance as they travel across the socio-economic divide," she said.

For her study, Shepherd looked at the Progress in Reading Literacy Survey (Pirls), where 78 percent of South African pupils got the lowest scores out of 40 tested countries.

Shepherd's study found that the following impacted on test results:

- Classroom practices: In African-language schools, regular classroom exercises and diagnostic testing were found to have significant impact. In English/Afrikaans schools, the use of books with chapters were found to be more effective.

- Extended learning time: In African-language schools where this was offered, and 75 percent of pupils participated, there was a significant impact on test performance.

- Homework: Frequent homework was found to have a positive impact in English/Afrikaans schools but had little impact in African-language schools, suggesting these pupils were not able to work through the curriculum without teacher support.

- Parental involvement: Help with homework, regular joint reading activities at home, and parent-child communication were found to have a positive impact.

- Teacher qualifications: Having a degree doesn't mean you are motivated, good at communicating, have time management skills and are confident, Shepherd said.

"Schools that are performing well are able to understand, choose, develop and evaluate relevant, effective practices," said Shepherd.

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