

Realising SONA 2019's education goals: what will it really take?

 By Dorcas Dube

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'Take two' of President Cyril Ramaphosa's SONA address was widely scoffed by politicians and political analysts as being 'big on dreams', but sorely lacking the necessary detail to actually remedy the country's intractable challenges.



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Even though the President's address may have scored an 'F' for pragmatism, perhaps it is the first time, in a while, South Africans were presented with an aspirational vision for a country grappling with the effects of a declining economy, increasing unemployment rates and below par public health and education services.

Spotlighting education

Although criticised as a '*de ja vu*-filled sequel' to the first SONA delivered at the beginning of 2019, this address built upon on seven key priorities the government has committed to. Among these priorities was a 'promise' to deliver on better educational outcomes in government-run schools within the next 10 years. Also, and rather importantly, the president elaborated on the government's goal of ensuring that every 10-year-old would be able to read for meaning – a goal one would reasonably expect is in response to the oft-cited, astonishing literacy statistic that 78% of 10 year olds in South Africa cannot read for meaning in any language.



PIRLS report shows 80% of SA children struggle to read at appropriate level

11 Dec 2017



Solution-driven ideas to wicked problems

One would be hard-pressed to find a South African who would not agree with the sentiment that abysmal literacy rates are indicative of a failing education system. Yet, many South Africans are not aware that education is a wicked problem – a

term coined by the experts that describes a challenge that has no clear solution, where implementing traditional solutions are usually ineffective and where throwing money at the problem does not yield long lasting change.

There is, however, growing recognition that the problems we face cannot be shouldered by government alone, and the crisis in education requires for other socio-economic partners such as business to lead the shift from this dispensation.

After all, business is on the receiving end of adults who have been subjected to the shortcomings of an education system which was meant to adequately prepare them for the working world.

Where to, then?

So how can business involvement radically improve literacy rates?

The philanthropic efforts of business in education have traditionally focussed on the tangible.

While this has been a step in the right direction, merely injecting money to build school library structures for instance is simply not enough.

In this case, the adage that it takes a village to raise a child rings true. By mobilising the village, that is, the adults who wield direct influence over the educational future of our children such as school principals and teachers, as well as parents and other interested parties, we create the human and social capital needed to tackle the critically important issue of literacy in the first thousand days of each child's life.

But capacitating our school leaders with the requisite leadership skills, who in turn, are able to motivate, energize and support their teachers, engage parents and mobilise resources first requires funding. Re-training teachers in early literacy best practice, rolling out literacy enhancement programmes in schools and hiring foundation phase classroom assistants all require funding.

This is money that business in South Africa possesses in abundance. This is money that business needs a worthwhile, sustainable conduit for investment.

Take the home-grown, internally recognised leadership development and principal support initiative, Partners for Possibility. Launched in 2010 by non-profit organisation, Symphonia for South Africa, the programme is passionate and committed to developing conscious, resilient leaders through its action based process that breaks down barriers, connects people and inspires change. It is designed to develop leadership skills of school principals and business leaders by creating greater awareness and a deeper understanding of the challenges within South Africa and how they can be addressed.

Currently, over 1,000 principals from under-resourced schools across South Africa have benefited from this training programme which has equipped principals with the skills and knowledge to lead change in their schools and communities. Many of these schools are primary schools that have successfully implemented literacy programmes, attracted donations

for the building of libraries and the stocking of suitable books, and even created jobs for qualified librarians. This ripple of sustainable change in each school began with the development of a strong, competent school leader.

Whether you were sold on President Ramaphosa's articulation of his vision for our beloved country, and believe that this SONA address marks a departure from years of empty rhetoric, one thought prevails: turning the tide on a failing education system will require the input of all South Africans. Perhaps we are the kind of leaders of country dearly needs.

ABOUT DORCAS DUBE

Dorcas is the National Marketing and Communications Manager for Citizen Leader Lab. She holds a Masters in Strategic Communication, Honours in Strategic Communication and a BA Corporate Communication all obtained from the University of Johannesburg. She is passionate about Social Justice, Education, Leadership and Humanitarian Work amongst others.

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