

# SCHOOL LEADERSHIP MATTERS:

## THE IMPORTANCE OF EMPHASIS ON ACADEMIC SUCCESS

School principals are no longer seen only as managers and administrators but are expected to be instructional leaders – the facilitators of teaching and learning activities where the emphasis is placed on academic success. South African secondary schools function in disparate socioeconomic conditions, and principals in each distinct context face challenges that may require different leadership and management approaches. These challenges must be overcome while quality educational outcomes are strived for. *Andrea Juan* uses the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) 2019 grade 9 data for South Africa to examine instructional leadership and how its associated elements are expressed in different local contexts.

In the past, school principals have been encouraged to be transformational, distributive, managerial and participative, among other characteristics. The South African Department of Basic Education views principals as ‘key delivery agents’ and ‘the most important partners in education’. The national education policy landscape reflects a growing consensus that a well-led schooling environment is critical for improving learner achievement. Hence, principals are required to be instructional leaders.

We use the TIMSS 2019 grade 9 data for South Africa to examine instructional leadership and how elements of it are expressed in different local contexts.

### Instructional leadership

The quality of education in a school is an outcome of an effective principal. Simply put, for educators to instruct learners well, they need to be guided by competent instructional leaders who can create an environment where academic success is emphasised. Also, instructional leadership is one of the key areas covered in the *Policy on the South African Standard for Principalship*,

which states that a school principal is required to:

- lead the learners and ensure that the school is a professional learning community;
- foster the success of all learners;
- promote a culture of achievement for all learners by communicating and implementing a common vision and mission;
- recognise good instructional practices that motivate and increase learner achievement; and
- encourage educators to implement these practices.

A common thread running through the requirements listed above is the high degree of emphasis placed on academic success. We, therefore, argue that schools that place a high emphasis on academic success are led by principals who are considered instructional leaders.

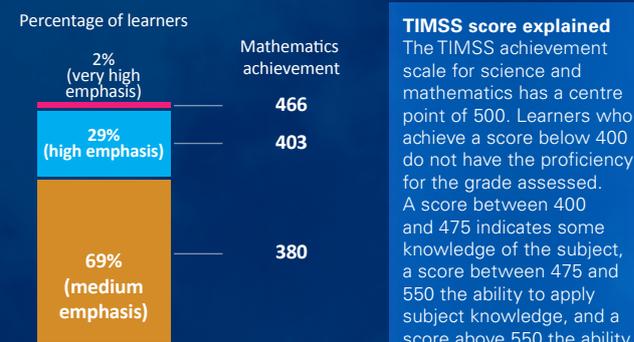
### What TIMSS 2019 tells us

School principals completed a TIMSS questionnaire, and 13 items from this were used to create a scale that quantifies the emphasis placed on academic success. For

our purposes, we equate this scale to the instructional leadership of a principal. The responses were then combined and schools were rated as 'very high', 'high' or 'medium' on the emphasis on academic success index.

In Figure 1, we see that 2% of grade 9 learners attended schools that placed a 'very high' emphasis on academic success, 29% attended schools with a 'high emphasis', and 69% attended schools with a 'medium' emphasis. The pattern is different internationally, where on average more learners attended schools that placed a 'very high' (8%) or 'high' emphasis (49%) on academic success. In line with international patterns, the higher the emphasis on academic excellence, the better the achievement of learners. South African learners who attended schools that placed a 'very high' emphasis on academic success had the highest average mathematics achievement, followed by the 'high' and 'medium' emphasis categories. We found a statistically significant relationship between the level of emphasis placed on academic success and achievement.

**Figure 1: Emphasis on academic success index and mathematics achievement**



**TIMSS score explained**  
 The TIMSS achievement scale for science and mathematics has a centre point of 500. Learners who achieve a score below 400 do not have the proficiency for the grade assessed. A score between 400 and 475 indicates some knowledge of the subject, a score between 475 and 550 the ability to apply subject knowledge, and a score above 550 the ability to apply knowledge and to reason.

Source: TIMSS 2019 South African dataset

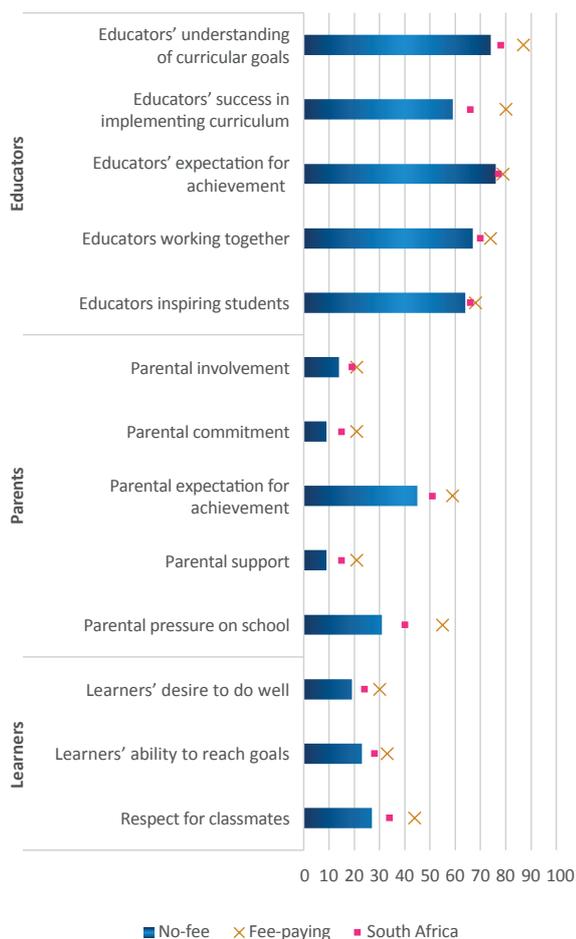
We examined what was driving these findings by looking at how principals responded to each of the questions used to derive the TIMSS index (Figure 2). We also examined



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the differences between public no-fee and public fee-paying schools to explore the different South African contexts. **Learners** in no-fee schools generally come from lower-income households, live in poorer communities, attend schools with fewer resources, and are largely taught by educators with less specialist knowledge. Conversely, learners in fee-paying schools come from largely middle-class families and better-resourced homes, as well as attend schools with better-qualified teachers.

**Figure 2: Principals’ perceptions of emphasis on academic success nationally and by school type**



**Source:** TIMSS 2019 South African grade 9 dataset

When comparing the principals’ views relating to the three groups of educators, parents, and learners, we see that principals have more positive views about educators than parents or learners. Nationally, between 60% and 80% of learners attended schools where their educators’ understanding of the school’s curricular goals, success in implementing the curriculum, expectation of learner achievement, and tendency to work together to improve learner achievement were ‘high.’ Principals felt that parents have high levels of expectations for

learner achievement (51%) but their involvement (19%), commitment (15%), or support (15%) in and of school affairs is low. Views about learner attributes were all below 35%.

When disaggregating the results by school type, we found that while the patterns for the three groups were similar – principals’ views were more positive about educators than parents’ or learners’ views about educators – there were some differences. Views from fee-paying schools’ principals were consistently more positive in comparison with those from principals from no-fee public schools. The widest gaps between the school types were found on views about parents and learners. According to principals, parents from fee-paying schools showed greater support for learner achievement, ensured that learners were ready to learn, and were more actively involved in supporting the school. They also placed greater pressure on schools to ensure academic standards were met. Whereas 21% of fee-paying school principals reported that parental commitment was high, only 9% of principals in no-fee schools viewed parental support in the same way. Similarly, more than 55% of principals at fee-paying schools reported high levels of parental pressure in contrast to 31% of principals from no-fee schools. These differences are statistically significant.

### Conclusion

About a third of South African grade 9 learners attended schools that placed a high emphasis on academic success – far below the international average of 57%. In addition, learners’ access to a school environment where a high emphasis was placed on academic achievement was largely dependent on whether they attended a fee-paying or no-fee school. This is concerning given the positive, significant relationship between the emphasis placed on academic success and achievement. As part of continuous professional development activities, the Department of Basic Education should prioritise training principals to become instructional leaders, by focusing on the elements that constitute academic leadership.

Our analysis suggests that although a strong leader is important, effective leadership also relies on support from multiple role players both within the school (educators and learners) and beyond (parents). The contributions of parents and learners must be encouraged and fostered, and principals can do this by facilitating open communication between themselves, educators, parents and learners. They should also articulate a common vision of success for the school and inspire educators, parents and learners to work towards shared goals.

**Author:** Dr Andrea Juan, a senior research specialist in the HSRC’s Inclusive Economic Development research division

[ajuan@hsrc.ac.za](mailto:ajuan@hsrc.ac.za)