



PROFILE: LEAP Science and Maths Schools

Achieving exceptional learning outcomes in South African townships through selective admissions, extended class time, and small classes

Challenge

Even after completing primary school, up to a quarter of South African children remain illiterate and innumerate (Spaull and Taylor 2012). Among disadvantaged children who do complete basic education, few qualify for tertiary education or succeed at math and science since high school “graduates” are inadequately equipped with emotional intelligence, self-awareness and life skills.



Innovation

LEAP Science & Maths Schools (www.leapschool.org.za/) is a chain of six fee-free private secondary schools in Cape Town, Johannesburg, Pretoria, and Limpopo, South Africa. In 2015, LEAP schools enrolled more than 950 students, all of them from households in the bottom two wealth quintiles. Sixty-five percent of students are girls, and more than 95 percent are black. LEAP innovates in three key ways:

- 1) It selects poor children with potential but no prospect of entering “high-performing” schools.
- 2) Its holistic curriculum prioritizes math, science, “life orientation” classes, and community work. Small classes, an extended school day, and learner-centered pedagogy maximize student-teacher contact time and learning opportunities.
- 3) It has a multi-sector network of local partnerships with private and public schools, community organizations, and government designed to build education alliances.

Central management recruits teachers, handles payroll, and aligns curriculum, teaching practices, and assessment. LEAP is funded by private South African and international donors, as well as government subsidies that cover about 15 percent of student costs.

Impact

LEAP schools have a relatively low dropout rate of less than 6 percent, compared with a national average of 49 percent (City Press 2014). Since 2004 more than 750 students have graduated. LEAP has created jobs for 170 school staff recruited from townships and about 40 African refugees recruited to staff the learning centers. Forty-two former students were enrolled in LEAP teacher training in 2015.

Scaling Up

LEAP’s results stem from its rigorous admissions practices, extended contact time with students, low turnover among teachers and school leaders, and regular external and peer evaluations. Its specialized curriculum and use of qualified staff cost USD 3,150 per student a year, roughly twice what public schools spend. Donor funding covered just 85 percent of operational costs. It is lobbying the government to receive the same subsidy as public schools (it currently receives just half as much). Other challenges include students’ difficult family circumstances and the shortage of skilled teachers.

References

City Press. 2014. “School Dropout Rates Double.” March 19. <http://www.news24.com/Archives/City-Press/School-dropout-rates-double-20150429>



Spaull, Nicholas, and Stephen Taylor. 2012. "Effective Enrolment": Creating a Composite Measure of Educational Access and Educational Quality to Accurately Describe Education System Performance in Sub-Saharan Africa. University of Stellenbosch, Stellenbosch, South Africa.