ZERO DROP OUT

LEARNING BRIEF

School Dropout Prevention Strategies

The role of psychosocial support in nurturing wellbeing and building resilience among high-risk learners.

JULY 2020

Vol. 1

OUR STORY

Zero Dropout Campaign

Our goal is to halve South Africa's dropout rate by 2030 by spurring individual and collective ownership of the problem. We began as a research project funded by the DG Murray Trust in 2015, but we have since grown into a national advocacy campaign with two dedicated programmes of action and a national network of implementing partners.

As a knowledge hub, we have collaborated with a number of non-profit organisations (NPOs) to test models of intervention to prevent dropout. In this way, we are focused on identifying and demonstrating what it takes to help learners complete Grade 12 by developing policy options at a macro level as well as on-the-ground interventions. We have taken a proactive approach to addressing dropout by promoting scalable interventions with a proven track record of success. Our Reading for Meaning programme focuses on a child's learning needs rather than their age or grade.

In an effort to drive a whole-of-society approach to reducing the rate of dropout, our outreach teams are mobilising a network of educators, parents and learners to work together to find solutions to the factors driving the dropout rate.

CONTENTS PAGE:

In this Issue, we examine the role of effective psychosocial support services in the prevention of school dropout.

1 **WHO IS DROPPING OUT AND WHY?**
...page 4

2 **WHAT IS PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?**
...page 5

3 **ZERO DROPOUT CAMPAIGN INTERVENTIONS**
...page 8

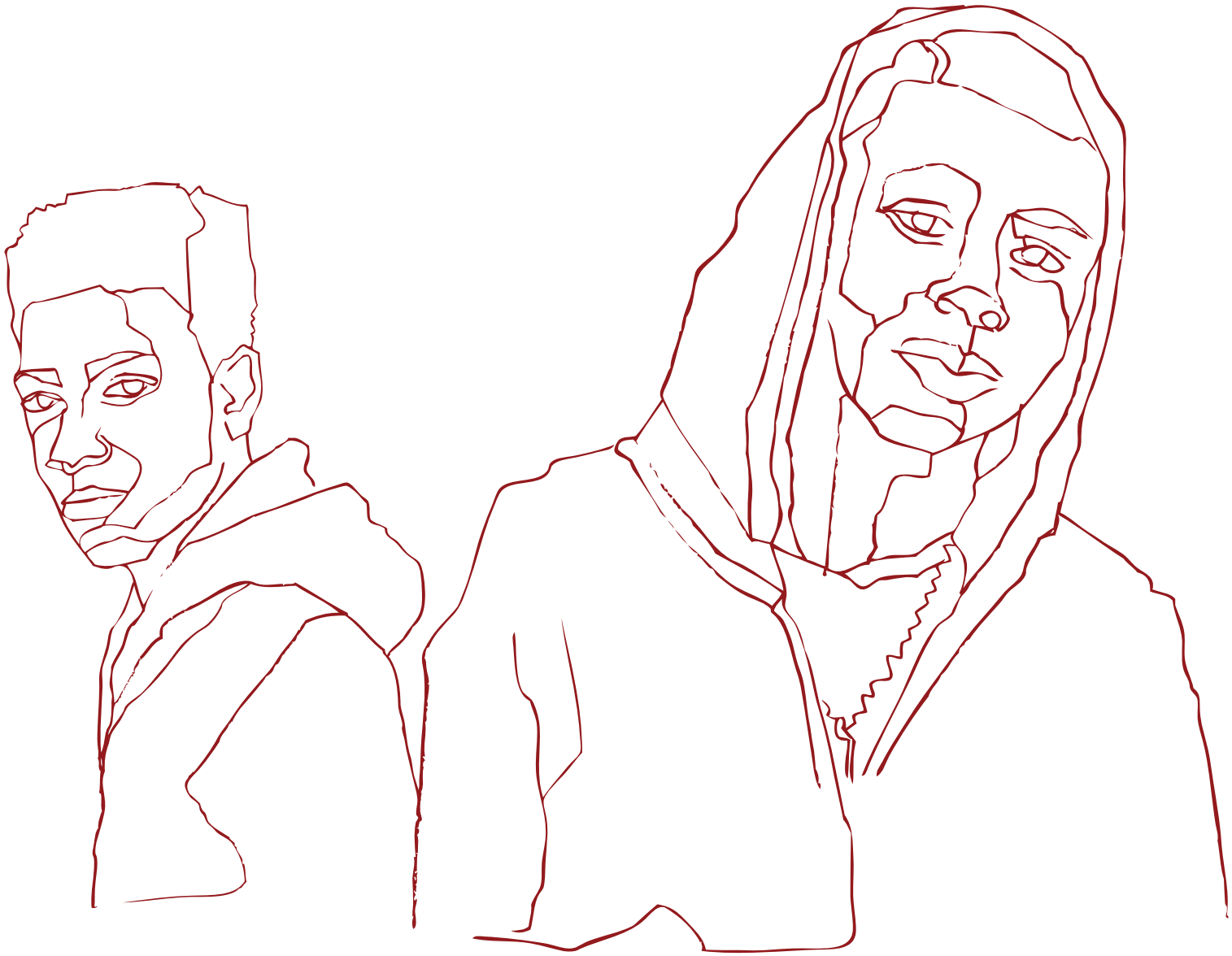
4 **FOUR KEY FEATURES OF OUR PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT STRATEGIES**
...page 12

5 **CONCLUSION**
...page 16

6 **GLOSSARY OF TERMS**
...page 17

7 **ENDNOTES**
...page 19

8 **OUR IMPLEMENTING PARTNERS**
...page 20



"Many at-risk children grow up in environments in which they lack the support of a caring adult. Often teachers are the ones who play this role in many communities, but they simply cannot attend to the needs of all their learners because of their heavy workloads and the realities of the schooling system."

- Merle Mansfield, Programme Director of the Zero Dropout Campaign

1 WHO IS DROPPING OUT AND WHY?

40% OF LEARNERS DROP OUT OF SCHOOL BEFORE GRADE 12[1].

Contrary to popular belief, most learners don't drop out because they are lazy or disinterested in school. In fact, research has shown that dropout follows a long journey in which a learner is pushed or pulled away from school[2].

The multi-layered factors influencing a learner's decision to drop out of school:

STUCTURAL ISSUES

Racism
Poverty
Inequality

INDIVIDUAL FACTORS

Gender
Disability
Pregnancy
Substance abuse

FAMILY FACTORS

Domestic violence
Child-headed households
Pressure to leave school and earn money

SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

Bullying
School culture
Corporal punishment
Falling behind academically
Relevance of the curriculum
Infrastructure and resource problems

2 WHAT IS PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Teachers and Learners at Gwebityala Senior Secondary School in the Eastern Cape make do with limited infrastructure. A number of learners live in remote areas and have to cross rivers to get to school. These often flood in heavy rains preventing learners from getting to and from school.

Many at-risk children grow up in environments in which they lack the support of a caring adult.

Often teachers are the ones who play this role in many communities, but they simply cannot attend to the needs of all their learners because of their heavy workloads and the realities of the schooling system.

Accessing key support services outside of the school environment is also not easy for residents of poor rural and urban communities. Resource shortages and a lack of awareness or information about available state-sponsored services are hampering access.

"The term 'psychosocial' denotes the inter-connection between psychological and social processes and the fact that each continually interacts with and influences the other.[3]"

Exposure to trauma, violence, loss of family members, hardships at home, deteriorating living conditions and lack of access to services can all have immediate and long-term consequences for children and their families[4]. These circumstances can affect a child's emotional well-being, mental health, and academic development.

GAPS IN THE STATE'S EFFORTS TO EXTEND PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT SERVICES IN SCHOOLS

→ OVEREXTENDED RESOURCES

Ideally, teachers and support staff, such as counsellors, should be able to provide their learners with academic and other forms of nurturing and support. However, two things make this an unlikely scenario in most public schools, especially those serving poor and marginalised communities. Firstly, the socio-economic problems found in such communities, including illiteracy, lack of resources, unemployment, drug and substance abuse, violence and gangsterism, early sexual activity and teenage pregnancy mean that school teachers and managers are not adequately equipped to handle the range of psychosocial issues that learners face. Secondly, the pressures of the school calendar coupled with the impact of large class sizes and mountains of administrative work, mean that teachers are simply not able to adequately assist learners who are struggling with academic or psychosocial issues[5].

District social workers deployed by the Department of Social Development are meant to visit schools in their districts. However, in practice, social workers do not have the capacity to visit all the schools in their districts on a regular basis, leaving a gap in the rollout of a much-needed service. For example, children with learning barriers end up leaving the education system without being assessed by a psychologist who would have been able to determine the child's specific learning needs.

→ INCONSISTENT IMPLEMENTATION

The Department of Basic Education in its White Paper (2005)[6] introduced District-based Support Teams (DBSTs) as a central part of the overall strengthening of education support services. These DBSTs were designed to include a wide number of support personnel at the district level to assist schools with all issues they struggle with, be they academic, psychosocial or administrative. DBSTs were to work with Institution (school)-Based Support Teams (IBSTs), made up of School Management Team members and other staff. But these teams are not functional is all provinces. Ideally, DBSTs are supposed to work together with the IBST to devise practical plans for learners who are struggling academically. These teams are also meant to provide

psychologists, counsellors, therapists and other health and welfare workers to schools to assist them in addressing behavioural and psychosocial issues. However, depending on the district, such support may not be possible.

→ FAIRLY SUPERFICIAL IMPACT

According to the department's guidelines, the composition of DBSTs would be influenced by local needs and resources, requiring a flexible approach[7]. There is an important role for professional specialists such as psychologists in these teams. But given the nature of psychosocial problems, the impact of district school psychologists — where they have been deployed — is fairly superficial, even if some learners receive support on occasion.

→ SCHOOLS LEFT BEHIND

The reality is that where IBSTs have been formed, they often do not receive much support from the DBSTs because the districts simply do not have the kind of personnel or resources required to provide the necessary support.

OUR STRATEGY

The Zero Dropout Campaign partners with four implementing agents operating in the Western Cape, Kwa-Zulu Natal and the Eastern Cape. Research shows that school dropout is the culmination of a long process of disengagement requiring a number of simultaneous responses tailored to the individual learner. One of the factors that can lead to disengagement and may eventually trigger a learner's decision to drop out is a lack of psychosocial support. Since under-resourced schools cannot afford to pay a dedicated counsellor or psychologist, a number of non-profit organisations have stepped in to fill the gap. However, this is not a sustainable solution because the need for psychosocial support is so great in many schools that even a holistic NGO intervention cannot cater for all learners at a particular school. Over the long-term, schools must be empowered to become self-sufficient, which is why three of our implementing partners are piloting more systemic approaches which can assist schools and state-sponsored support services to provide the required level of psychosocial support.

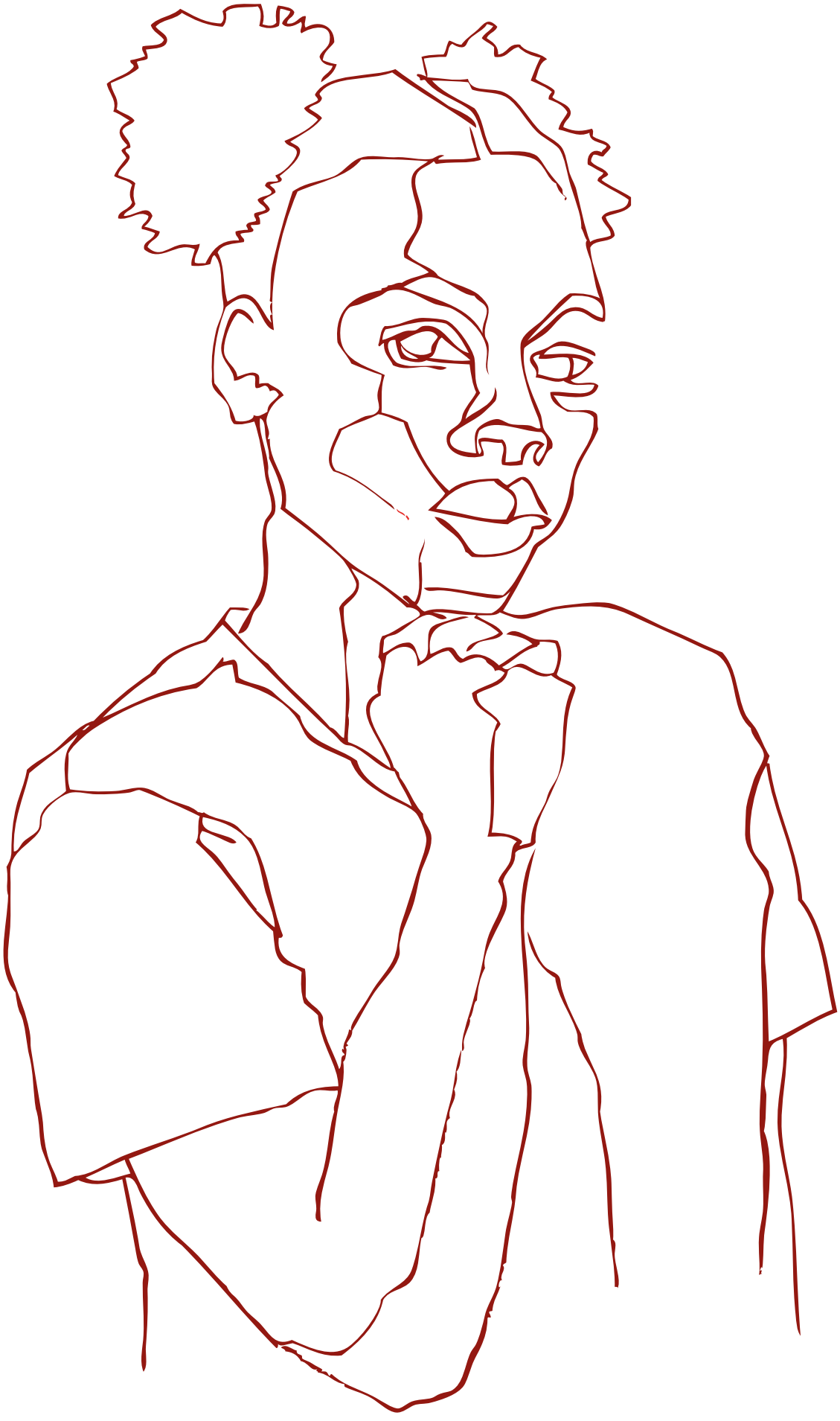
3 ZERO DROPOUT CAMPAIGN INTERVENTIONS

KEY ELEMENTS

Our implementing partners have placed psychosocial support at the heart of their dropout prevention strategies.

These strategies incorporate the following elements:

- ROLE-MODELLING
- MENTORING AND MONITORING
- GROUP AND INDIVIDUAL COUNSELLING
- LIFE-SKILLS BUILDING
- SOCIAL AND SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE
- REFERRAL TO PROFESSIONAL AND STATE SERVICES



"Since 2016, our implementing partners have rolled out initiatives in various schools across the country to support learners at risk of disengagement and dropping out. These initiatives are aimed at pupils in late primary and early secondary school because dropout peaks in high school."

- Merle Mansfield, Programme Director of the Zero Dropout Campaign

Orleansvale Primary School in Paarl East is one of the areas where the Khula Development Group is active. The non-profit organisation aims to reintegrate primary school children in disadvantaged communities, at risk of dropping out, back into the school system.

4 FOUR KEY FEATURES OF OUR PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT STRATEGIES

1/ MONITORING BY A CARING ADULT

The Masibumbane Development Organisation (MDO) has adopted the American dropout prevention model of "Check & Connect" (C&C) and adapted aspects to suit the local context of three senior schools and three primary schools in poor communities in East London. MDO works with learners in Grade 6 to Grade 9, and identifies up to 30 at-risk learners at each school through the C&C criteria at the beginning of the year for inclusion in a mentoring programme.

→ HOW IT WORKS

The Masibumbane Development Organisation employs mentors, who are social workers trained in the Check & Connect methodology, to work with learners. These mentors get to know the exact reasons why a learner is struggling or misbehaving, which helps teachers to understand the child's situation better. MDO mentors conduct one-to-one sessions with learners in the mentoring programme on a weekly basis. In these sessions, the mentors discuss progress with schoolwork, issues that a learner is facing at school or at home, and they do skill-building exercises such as goal-setting and time-management to assist the learner to develop a plan for the year and to stick to agreed milestones.

In many cases MDO's one-to-one counselling and mentoring has shown impressive results, with mentored learners improving behaviourally in terms of their class attendance and academic performance. Positioning this intervention as a mentorship programme is key to its success as vulnerable learners have embraced the idea of having a caring mentor to work with at school. The mentors also work closely with teachers, especially a number of "champion" teachers interested in assisting struggling learners, and with Learner Support Agents.

→ CASE STUDY

The Masibumbane Development Organisation launched a Check & Connect programme at an East London school in January 2018 to identify and support learners at risk of dropping out. Often, a lack of academic and psychosocial support can lead to learners disengaging, skipping classes, and eventually dropping out of school. The Check & Connect initiative demonstrates the value of pairing at-risk learners with supportive mentors.

14-year-old Simphiwe* (name changed for anonymity) moved to East London to be closer to this father. He used to attend a rural school where the medium of instruction was mainly in isiXhosa, so he found it difficult to adjust to English, which was predominantly spoken at his new school. Simphiwe struggled both academically and socially as he had not yet made any new friends. He began to skip classes and was frequently absent from school, which is why he was placed on the Check & Connect programme.

Simphiwe was allocated a mentor who worked with twenty high-risk learners in the school. She immediately cultivated a relationship with him, offering guidance, counselling and support. The mentor also contacted Simphiwe's father and informed him about his son's absenteeism. Together with his father, the mentor compiled a monitoring plan to ensure that Simphiwe did not skip any more classes. The mentor monitored his attendance daily and made sure to report any absences to Simphiwe's father.

When Simphiwe noticed that both his mentor and father cared about his attendance and education, his attitude began to shift in a positive way. MDO also made sure that Simphiwe received tutoring for maths, English and science. As a result, Simphiwe's classwork and academic performance began to improve. He is now doing much better thanks to the Check & Connect programme.

2 REFERRAL OF A HIGH-RISK CASE BY TEACHERS

A system must be in place in which teachers identify learners who need additional assistance or are showing signs of disengagement, and refer them to our implementing partners. Our implementing partners have found that building relationships with teachers is crucial to rolling out effective psychosocial support. The Khula Development Group (KDG) has a well-developed system in schools in Paarl. With the full buy-in of school managers and teachers, a referral box is placed in a prominent place in the school for teachers to submit referral forms to KDG.

→ HOW IT WORKS

KDG employs women from the community as "Dropout Catchers" who work with the schools to monitor absenteeism closely and follow-up on children who raise concerns. They rely on the teachers to refer learners to them who have been absent for three consecutive days, or who show concerning behavioural patterns. While this system works fairly well, some teachers are more diligent or invested in the KDG work or their learners than others.

If a child shows signs of not attending school regularly or not arriving at school properly clothed or clean, the Dropout Catchers follow up with home visits to caregivers to ascertain what problems are causing absenteeism or disengagement, and to see if there is an appropriate solution.

In addition, KDG runs an in-school support system which works through weekly 45-minute sessions run by a coordinator and volunteers, where psychosocial support and basic academic support (often through remedial literacy and numeracy games) are provided. The grade 6 and 7 learners enrolled in this programme were identified as high risk by their poor attendance record and evidence of behavioural and cognitive problems in class. Due to the lack of space and volunteers, these sessions only include a small number of grade 6 and 7 learners (between 5 and 15 in each school). Despite one-to-one sessions only happening once a week in term times, those learners who have received such close support and counselling have demonstrated marked improvement in their schoolwork.

→ CASE STUDY

Among the poor communities in Paarl East, many households rely on seasonal agricultural work and state grants for survival. Drug and substance abuse are rife. In one case, three learners at one primary school were chronically absent and when they did attend, they appeared neglected. Both parents were drug abusers who lived with the children in a small shack.

Dropout Catchers visited the mother on numerous occasions to try to improve conditions for the children and assist them to attend school regularly. The children were helped with new clothes and baths, and they started attending school regularly again. They were also put onto KDG's in-school support programme. However, conditions in the house were so bad that these children continued to be a disengagement risk. Even though absentee monitoring and engagements with parents can have some impact on school attendance and engagement, the chronic nature of problems at a household level can be a major barrier to long-term success. Given that dropout arises from deep-seated socio-economic issues, we need long-term social and economic changes to prevent dropout. This should include reducing poverty, creating jobs, and promoting social development.

3 GROUP PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT SESSIONS, SUPPORT GROUPS AND LIFE SKILLS

Our implementing partners incorporate group work and peer-to-peer support in the implementation of their programmes.

→ HOW IT WORKS

These sessions incorporate life-skills, helping the learners to explore peer pressure, challenges at school and home, and their future goals together. Issues such as substance abuse and teenage pregnancy feature prominently in subjects explored in these group sessions.

→ CASE STUDY

Our implementing partner CAP, operating in Swellendam, has taken group work further by introducing a successful drug support group attended by 20 learners at a secondary school in the area. These learners were identified as those using and addicted to various substances. The group was taken on a rehabilitation journey led by CAP's social worker. Learners in this group showed evidence of positive behavioural change, and they were made junior rangers at the nearby Bontebok National Park to connect them to meaningful out-of-school activities to show them alternative future prospects. By the end of 2017, the care workers from the secondary school reported that most of the learners in the group were now "clean" and had exited the group successfully. Similar groups were established in the junior schools, with an anger management groups being established in both.

4 REFERRAL TO KEY SERVICES AND SUPPORT

Considering that schools in deep rural areas don't have easy access to social services and resources, our implementing partners link learners to a range of social services.

→ HOW IT WORKS

The National Association for Child and Youth Care Workers (NACCW) operates in eight schools in KwaZulu-Natal, where it trained and supports Learner Support Agents to become a crucial providers of psychosocial support to learners. One of the roles of the Learner Support Agents and NACCW support staff is to connect schools to a range of services. Learners are also linked to clinics, school social workers, and organisations such as Childline and Lifeline.

Case studies illustrate how caring adult support as well as ongoing monitoring and counselling can turn a disengaging child around. Photo supplied by NACCW.

5 CONCLUSION

→ LEARNER SUPPORT

Psychosocial support is crucial for learners struggling to cope with school for a range of reasons associated with their home, community and school environments. The psychosocial support mechanisms implemented by our partners have shown effective for most of the learners who directly benefitted from them.

→ IMPACT ON SCHOOL CULTURE

These measures are also having a wider impact on school culture. Both school culture and climate play a role in ensuring positive education outcomes. A school's climate refers to infrastructure, while culture relates to norms, attitudes, behaviour and values.

→ BUY-IN FROM TEACHERS

Through these interventions, teachers came to know the underlying problems driving learner disengagement and were able to assist them to reengage with their schoolwork in a caring way, supported by the mentor. In 2017, for instance, a school in KwaZulu-Natal associated with the National Association for Child and Youth Care Workers decided to abandon corporal punishment after they were shown that a more caring approach would yield better outcomes. In the same way, schools affiliated with the Masibumbane Development Orgsanisation in East London have learnt not to give up on disengaged learners as they used to.

→ SYSTEMIC SHIFTS

These small changes can serve as an example to other schools and lead to even more significant shifts in schools, which assist to make them into caring environments that support and nurture learners academically, socially and psychologically. Over the long-term schools must learn to be self-sufficient so they can provide the required level of psychosocial support and access other state-sponsored support services.

6 GLOSSARY OF TERMS

PSYCHOSOCIAL

The term 'psychosocial' denotes the inter-connection between psychological and social processes and the fact that each continually interacts with and influences the other.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC

Socio-economic refers to the inter-connected relationship between societal and economic factors, and how these factors relate to and influence one another. It can also refer to the relationship between social behavior and economics.

SCHOOL DROPOUT

Also known as early 'withdrawal' or 'attrition', dropout is leaving the schooling system without obtaining a minimum credential. A learner in South Africa is therefore considered to have dropped out if they leave school before they obtain a National Senior Certificate (NSC) in Grade 12 or equivalent certificate such as the NC(V) or NQF level 4 (from a post-schooling education and training institution).

SCHOOL COMPLETION VS. SCHOOL DROPOUT

The word 'dropout' often calls up images of lazy, irresponsible teens, who aren't in school because of their own poor choices. **But this is usually not the case.** Because 'dropout' carries this stigma, some who work in this field prefer the term 'school completion'. In this publication, we have chosen to stick with 'dropout' because it demands sharper, clearer action. As a society, we should expect **ZERO DROPOUT!**

ACRONYMS AND ABREVIATIONS

NACCW	The National Association for Child and Youth Care Workers
DBSTs	District-based Support Teams
IBSTs	Institution (school)-Based Support Teams
MDO	Masibumbane Development Organisation
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NPO	Non-profit Organisation
KDG	Khula Development Group
CAP	Community Action Partnership
NSC	National Senior Certificate
C&C	Check & Connect

7 ENDNOTES

1 van Broekhuizen, Hendrik and Van der Berg, Servaas and Hofmeyr, Heleen, Higher Education Access and Outcomes for the 2008 National Matric Cohort (May 25, 2017). Stellenbosch Economic Working Papers No.16/2016. Available at SSRN: https://ssrn.com/abstract=2973723 or http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2973723

2 See Hammond, C., D. Linton, D., Smink, J & Drew, S. 2007. Dropout Risk Factors and Exemplary Programmes: A Technical Report. National Dropout Prevention Center at Clemson University and Communities In Schools, Inc. Available at: https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED497057.pdf; Branson. M., Hofmeyr, C. and Lam, D. 2013. Progress through School and the Determinants of School Dropout in South Africa. SALDRU Working Paper 100 Available here: http:// opensaldru.uct.ac.za/handle/11090/616; De Witte, K., Cabus, S., Thyssen, G., Groot, W. & van den Brink, H.M. 2013. A Critical Review of the Literature on School Dropout. Tier Working Paper Series: Tier WP 14/14. Available at: http://www.tierweb.nl/tier/assets/files/UM/Working%20papers/TIER%20WP%2014-14.pdf

3 https://www.unicef.org/protection/57929_57998.html

4 Ibid

5 The concentration on contact time and curriculum delivery means there is often no adequate time in which either school staff or outside organisations can effectively provide psychosocial support to learners. Learners are not supposed to be taken away from class, so the breaks are often the only other time they are free. These are short, however, and often learners have other priorities such as obtaining food from the school feeding scheme. After school is also a problem in a lot of cases due to transport challenges, safety issues with regard to staying late, expectations from families of assistance with chores after school, and lack adequate food for the afternoon.

6 Department of Education (2005). Conceptual and Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of Inclusive Education: District-Based Support Teams.

7 Ibid

ACKNOWLEDGEMTS

We would like to thank Dr Andrew Hartnack for providing us with the technical reports used to compile this Learning Brief.

8 OUR IMPLEMENTING PARTNERS

COMMUNITY ACTION PARTNERSHIP

An initiative that mobilises the community of Swellendam to tackle school dropout as a collective.

capnpc.co.za

MASIBUMBANE DEVELOPMENT ORGANISATION

Using early warning systems to support and respond to young people at risk of dropping out.

masibumbanedevelopment.org.za

KHULA DEVELOPMENT GROUP

Creating opportunities for psychosocial support and academic catch-up in schools.

khuladg.co.za

THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF CHILD CARE WORKERS (NACCW)

Using Child and Youth Care Workers (CYCWs) at schools to provide lower-cost psychosocial support.

naccw.org.za

ZERO DROPOUT

The Zero Dropout Campaign aims to halve the rate of school dropout by 2030.

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