



Dear Reader

13 December 2024

“When accountability knocks, will anyone answer?”: transforming schools through accountability.

In reflecting on one year as the province's Chief Evaluator, I felt a need to put some thoughts in writing.

When I was appointed, I had two pressing priorities:

1. Build a high trust team of Lead Evaluators and Evaluators to conduct evaluations throughout the province.
2. Write the Schools Evaluation Authority's (SEA) 'Strategy 2024 – 2028'. The strategic priorities are:
 - A fit-for-purpose evaluation framework.
 - Using school evaluation standards and indicators to support continuous school improvement.
 - Evaluations that raise standards.
 - Promote the SEA as a credible regulatory body.
 - Skilled, knowledgeable and respectful evaluators.

It is against the backdrop of these strategic priorities that the SEA must become a force for improvement, especially for the province's **most disadvantaged children**. This is why I do this job. If truth be told, it is doubly true for so many teachers and, leaders, in our schools too.

Learners must always be our top priority. **They are and always will be.**

During the past year the SEA has become a 'Schools in a Mirror' authority, one which shows schools their best work, and some of their worst work too. We have had to call some schools out in reports which were not glowing. Our findings were never judgemental; they were objective assessments of how schools do business, based on our world class evaluation framework. Where necessary, we made priority recommendations. However, shining a light on outstanding work has been the best part of the year because so many schools do an incredible job educating young minds, many under often difficult circumstances.

Evaluation teams conducted 81 evaluations in 124 days. This equates to one evaluation every 1.53 days. This is incredible progress in my view. We broke new ground by evaluating our first special school, agricultural school and subsidised independent school. Public private partnerships (PPPs), more Mathematics and Physical Sciences (MST) schools as well as more Technical High Schools will be evaluated next year in order to keep pace, and align with, ministerial priorities for education.

In 2024, we asked parents, learners, School Management Team members, teachers, and even principals for their views on what their schools do and how they do it. We consulted schools on our reports. In online surveys, they answered anonymously. We listened. We reported, without glossing over any challenges.

We received 23 774 online responses. Learners and their parents contributed to 20 964 of these responses. 1 963 teachers, 364 members of SMTs and 405 governors responded too. It strengthened our triangulation to ensure that our reports not only considered what schools thought, at times, we wanted to hear. Raw 'voice', those which often go unheard, provided us with a richness of data that the loudest voices often did not, or would not, provide us with.

We were not always favourably embraced, especially after schools disagreed with their ratings. There were some strong opinions on 'evaluators expertise' and how well they understood the settings, and contexts, of schools. We heard that our instrument could be more tailored to different types of schools such as special schools, despite adapting the instrument for that very purpose (two of our evaluators are special school experts). Schools were almost unanimous in their verdict that they were not given enough notice and that a two-day evaluation could not possibly be enough time to rate their schools. It was heart-warming, though, to see that every school knew that a SEA evaluation was high stakes.

By far the biggest criticism was the time we spent observing teachers, and learners. Schools questioned our 20-minute observations with a view that teaching and learning could not be rated in "20 minutes". Of course, that argument was given short shrift because cumulatively, we spent hours observing lessons, at each school. The SEA embraces the "20-minute

walkthroughs or look fors" in its methodology to rate teaching and learning (key area 2). In total, we observed approximately 2 000 teachers and 63 810 learners in action for approximately 1 000 hours. 2 127 lessons were observed. I made sure that the evaluators not only focused on the teaching, but also on evidence of 'visible' learning.

What I also heard, and received in writing, was that our evaluators conducted themselves professionally, provided constructive feedback and that our reports and priority recommendations would make a difference to education quality at the schools evaluated. The SEA has built a quality evaluation team who are skilled, knowledgeable and respectful. I value what they do.

The Metro South, Metro East and West Coast Education District Directors invited me to speak at their 'Principals' Roadshow' meetings. The Overberg Education District invited me to speak to their curriculum component in Caledon. Advocacy certainly helped, especially when principals knew what to expect. District Directors Mrs Cherie Meyer-Williams, Ms Landeka Diamond and Ms Anlerie Truter are three of our biggest champions, eager to use our reports to turn around some of their under-performing schools. Mr Jewel Jonkers, Director of Eden and Central Karoo Education District, attended two of our feedback sessions to schools after the evaluation. Jewel is another SEA champion. Mrs Meyer-Williams also attended feedback sessions at some of her schools. This speaks volumes of leveraging leadership to impact lasting change.

When I heard that circuit managers put aside many Saturdays to engage schools on their evaluation reports, and to draft a "Way forward" I know that we are a force for change. These are circuit managers who know that accountability for school improvement, and development, is a collective responsibility. The school cannot be the **sole unit of accountability**.

We also heard the frustrations and fears about the impact of cost containment measures on schools in the coming years. Context will matter more. The SEA must be more considerate of specific context within which schools operate beyond 2025 without bending the knee to mediocrity.

The SEA wants to ensure that Western Cape schools are accessible to every child, and that access to the economy, and a better life, are future visions every school sees for its children. Schools must be a springboard for success. We must expect the highest standards for all children, especially the disadvantaged and vulnerable – because **if you get it right for them, you get it right for all learners**. 'Address' and 'area code' must never become an excuse for lowering expectations (benevolent pathology). We know that it is harder for schools working with the most disadvantaged children, but we must ensure that **behavioural and academic expectations** remain high, as priorities.

It helps that we continue to receive significant numbers of applications for our evaluators' posts. As recently as October 2024, 37 applicants applied for posts at the SEA. Only 4 were shortlisted and two were offered posts for 2025. I will always be discerning in the evaluators

appointed to evaluate schools. Schools value the fact that our evaluators were themselves all immersed in the life of schools – it adds great impact to the reports and lends credibility to the SEA. Evaluators have a deep understanding of what good schools look like. In 2025 we add two more evaluators to our pool of experts; both are former school principals with almost 80 years of high energy experience between them.

On 23 November 2024, at a prestigious **Certification Event** held at the Sanlam Head Office in Bellville, the SEA officially certified 22 schools as 'Good' and 18 schools as 'Outstanding'. 10 of the 'Outstanding' schools achieved a 'Full house' i.e., they are outstanding in all key areas, namely (1) Learner Achievement, (2) Teaching & Learning, (3) Behaviour & Safety, (4) Leadership & Management and (5) Governance, parents & community. Both the provincial Minister of Education Mr David Maynier (our Keynote Speaker) and Superintendent-General (SG), Mr Brent Walters, were in attendance to witness the certification of Western Cape schools. Who better to have than our very own Minister and SG championing the SEA.

The SEA can do better, and we will do better, whilst unapologetically holding all to account for the highest standards. I will make sure that our evaluation activity, and priority recommendations, are focused on where they will have **the most positive impact for learners**.

Education can have a transformational effect on children's life chances. That is why we all do what we do. And it is why we want to make sure all children get the best start and every possible opportunity to succeed.

As we look to the future, high standards will continue to be at the heart of our work. I have a vision where both 'inside-out' (district) and 'outside-in' (school) support work seamlessly to transform children's lives at many of our schools. We must get our support as an education system right though. Schools need it – and are worth it. That is a pressing need.

It has been a great privilege serving the province and contributing to the vision for education during this past year.

Kind regards



David J. Millar

Chief Evaluator

