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## **Leadership which transforms school accountability. The “Cheryl Jacobs and Stephen Price Effect”**

**“It can be done.”**

Dear Reader

The stardust has well settled on the NSC 2024 results. Almost 3 months later. It was pleasing to see the improvement across all districts, especially the 5% improvement in the provincial pass rate. Bachelor passes, an indicator of quality passes, has also improved. Overall, indicators are that the province did better than it has ever done before.

In his speech at Leeuwenhof – to the matric achievers of 2024 – Minister Maynier indicated that **“It can be done ...”**. He was referring to both achievements, despite barriers, as well as to improvement. Atul Gawande, in 2007, stated: *“Better is possible. It does not take genius. It takes diligence. It takes moral clarity. It takes ingenuity. And above all, it takes a willingness to try.”*

Minister Maynier spoke of the improvements at both Lotus High and Crestway High. In the space of 18 months Lotus High has moved its Grade 12 pass percentage from the dismal doldrums of the thirties to almost mid-eighties. Crestway High, the province's worst performing high school in 2023 almost doubled its pass rate, in 12 months, moving it from somewhere in the 30s to the 60s in 2024! Although heroic leadership cannot be ruled out at both schools, the power of collective capacity has enabled ordinary teachers, and leaders, with *change agents* - Cheryl Jacobs, Stephen Price and Professor Jonathan Jansen - to achieve extraordinary results. **It can be done.**

Looking at both schools, and at other schools with similar good news to tell, working together generates commitment. It appears as if moral purpose has been the lens through which collective effort has become palpable. Michael Fullan (2010) coined the phrase *“The collective motivational well seems bottomless”*. The ‘Cheryl Jacobs and Stephen Price Effect’ at Crestway High and Lotus High, respectively, has, for

example, inspired a collective of teachers, learners and parents to strive to do better.  
**It can be done.**

The SEA undertook an evaluation at Crestway High School. I was struck by the 'presence' of a visionary principal, leading during tough times – and in a tough-to-teach-at-school. Mrs Jacobs is a resilient leader, carving out a 'culture' that will transform lives. A critical mass of teachers, learners and parents will have to follow her on this journey of school development.

Accountability is a systemic concept. Let me explain my views on this.

Working in education at the very granular level of schools for almost 30 years, and now as Chief Evaluator of schools in the province, I have come to realise that, at its simplest, 'accountability' describes a particular relationship whereby one party (usually the principal and/or school) has an obligation to account for their actions or performance (NSC and/or systemic results) to another (e.g., the education district office or the Western Cape Education Department).

On the other hand, however, 'The Stephen Price Effect' or the 'Cheryl Jacobs Effect' involves **more responsibility, a more personal concept**. Intrinsicly, leaders like Mr Price, Mrs Jacobs and Prof. Jansen feel a sense of responsibility, especially for the children in their charge. For them, and many like them, it is personal.

In wrapping my head around these leaders, and their 'effect', one particular question came to mind. Why do so many leaders achieve so much, with so little? One could say that these 'effects' are self-improving effects, one where the leaders leverage greater use of moral and professional accountabilities. Mr Price and Mrs Jacobs are accountable to the learners and their parents. It is 'downward' accountability. They feel accountable to their staff (and hold them accountable too) and know that professional development is part and parcel of any improvement effort. Building relationships is at the heart of what they do.

Whether or not the district offices, the WCED, or even the Schools Evaluation Authority exists (upward accountability) is perhaps immaterial to leaders like Mrs Jacobs and Mr Price (despite a SEA evaluation that rated Lotus High 'Inadequate' in 2023, and Crestway High was rated 'Requires Improvement' in 2025) because both leaders embrace a leadership accountability model which takes two key approaches to accountability:

1. Performance is critical as it sells hope – and learners come to school to learn, grow and to do well. This is all about proving quality through improved results (summative model).

2. Improvement (what does quality look like at Lotus High and Crestway High?) which assesses academic results as well as the quality of teaching, learning, management and leadership, so that the hard questions around 'quality' – or lack thereof – may be asked. This is more of a formative approach, as it is designed to improve quality at every level of the school (after prioritising what matters first i.e., teaching, learning and outcomes).

'The Cheryl Jacobs and Stephen Price Effect' show what can be done. If Cheryl Jacobs and Stephen Price (or his replacement as curator principal), and others, wish to continue the improvement journey, they will have to strike a delicate balance between both approaches above, one that energises their schools and leverages change. Schools must take greater ownership of accountability (as a default setting) and embrace it as something which supports them on their school improvement journey.

Good principals, and teachers, have a 'downward' accountability 'default setting' – to the learners and their parents. It is called accountability from the heart. They care. They sell hope. If anything, Mrs Jacobs and Mr Price will negate perceptions that accountability is based on a centralised, 'upward' regime of evaluation by the Schools Evaluation Authority (and compliance-driven policy and programmes by the State).

Abelmann and Elmore (1999) put it bluntly: "When accountability knocks, will anyone answer?". **Stephen Price did. Cheryl Jacobs did. Jonathan Jansen did.** With a Team of teachers and leaders. Born of a vision to sell hope and improve lives. 'The Cheryl Jacobs and Stephen Price Effect' is alive and well and lives especially in so many of our self-improving schools. **It can be done.**



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