

RETHINKING SCHOOL GOVERNANCE: UNLOCKING THE POWER OF LEARNER LEADERSHIP

Presented by Rev DM van der Merwe



Introduction



- Imagine a school where students aren't just learners = they're leaders.
- Where their voices aren't just heard = they matter.
- Today, I'm going to explore how learner leadership can transform schools from the inside out.

What is Learner Leadership?

- Real participation in school decision-making
- Students as co-leaders, not just committee members
- Leadership that aligns with student needs and priorities



Learner-Centered Leadership

- Leadership moves from authority to collaboration
- Focuses on trust, communication, and partnership with learners
- Prioritizes teaching and learning as the core of governance



Shared Governance



- Schools as communities: students, teachers, and parents share responsibility
- Inclusive decision-making that democratizes school life
- Challenges: cultural perceptions and structural barriers can limit participation

Turning Vision into Reality

- Create collaborative structures for dialogue
- Redefine leadership roles to empower students
- Address power dynamics so learner voices are valued
- Invest in training for both students and school leaders



RCLs: Platforms for Learner Leadership

- Representative Councils of Learners are mandated by law
- They give students a formal voice in governance

Examples:

Thandukwazi Secondary School: transformed school culture through RCL-led initiatives



Bedfordview Edenvale: RCL members participate in discipline, events, and planning



Key Roles of RCLs



- Participate in school governance and decision-making
- Promote democratic practices and inclusion
- Mediate conflicts and support a safe school environment
- Develop leadership, negotiation, and problem-solving skills



Challenges for RCLs

- Limited influence in critical decisions
- Cultural and structural barriers in some schools
- Risk of tokenism: existing on paper but not in practice

Enhancing RCL Effectiveness

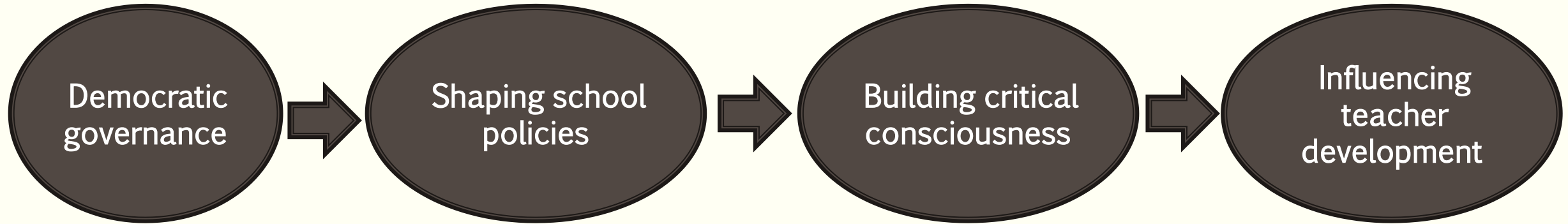
- Train students in leadership, advocacy, and conflict resolution
- Create inclusive spaces for dialogue and decision-making
- Ensure adult support from teachers and school leaders

Learner Voices in SGBs



- Learners influence School Governing Bodies (SGBs) and district policies
- Participation fosters democratic governance and inclusive school practices
- Students contribute to decisions affecting policies, culture, and teaching

Impact beyond the School



- Policies improve with learner input
- District-level influence: example of Thandukwazi Secondary School in Sebokeng and the regional story from Bedfordview
- Encourages critical consciousness and social responsibility
- Learner feedback drives teacher reflection and professional growth



Barriers and Solutions



- Structural and cultural barriers can marginalize student voices
- Solutions: training in deliberation, advocacy, and inclusive governance
- Align understanding of learner voice across schools and districts

Opportunities in the BELA Act

Addresses historical inequalities in education

Embeds principles of transformative constitutionalism

Standardizes governance policies for equity and inclusion

Creates pathways for broader student participation

BELA Bill: Separating Fact from Fiction

With concerns over public involvement and implementation of the BELA Bill, SECTION27 debunks some myths

ABORTION

Fiction

The BELA Bill, often misunderstood as an abortion Bill, has generated misconceptions suggesting that it grants teachers authority to mandate abortions or interfere in learners' pregnancies. There are concerns about parental notification and the possibility of learners being compelled into abortions.

Fact

According to Section 61 of The South African Schools Act, the BELA Bill does not empower teachers or school officials to participate in a learner's abortion decision. The reference to 'learner pregnancy' in BELA is unrelated to abortion. Furthermore, BELA cannot confer powers conflicting with the Choice on Termination of Pregnancy Act, which clearly outlines permissible roles in the abortion process.

CENTRALISED GOVERNANCE

Fiction

Full centralisation of powers. There is a belief that the BELA Bill will be removing all SGB powers and placing the powers to govern in the hands of Heads of Departments.

Fact

SGBs will maintain authority over language and admissions policies, subject to HoD approval aligned with the Constitution, ensuring a non-arbitrary process.

GOVERNMENT & CURRICULUM

Fiction

The BELA Bill will give government the power to determine the curriculum of schools. This misconception relates to the centralisation of powers and fears that HoDs will be able to control all aspects of a school's curriculum.

Fact

Curriculum is regulated by the National Curriculum and Policy Statement (CAPS). ANY change to national curriculum would have to be done through an amendment to CAPS and can not be done through an amendment to The South African Schools Act or the Employment of Educators Act.

COMPREHENSIVE SEXUALITY EDUCATION

Fiction

Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) will be introduced into school curriculums and taught to students from a young age.

Fact

Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) is not included in the BELA Bill and contains no provisions or relevance to it. Should the state wish to change the curriculum to include CSE, they would have to meaningfully engage with stakeholders.

USURPING PARENTS POWER

Fiction

The BELA Bill will take away parents' right to control their child's education and enforce curriculums on parents who opt to homeschool their children.

Fact

Parents who opt to homeschool will still have the right to determine what they teach their children, so long as it is in the child's best interest, the parents accept full responsibility, and the education envisioned is appropriate. The intention of this clause is not to control children's education but to bring regulation to a sector which for the most part has been unregulated.

Balancing Challenges

- Centralization reduces discriminatory practices but may limit flexibility
- Success requires cultural and practical shifts
- Schools must balance structure with innovation to empower learners



Unlocking the Power of Learners



- Learners are capable, creative, and ready to lead
- Platforms like RCLs and SGBs are transformative, not just procedural
- Benefits: democratic practice, empowered students, inclusive communities
- Schools where students live democracy every day



Closing Thoughts

LEADERSHIP ISN'T RESERVED FOR ADULTS

EVERY LEARNER HAS THE POTENTIAL TO SHAPE THEIR SCHOOL
AND COMMUNITY

BY VALUING STUDENT VOICES, WE TRANSFORM SCHOOLS INTO
HUBS OF PARTICIPATION, EQUITY, AND EMPOWERMENT

Presented by Rev DM van der Merwe



References

- Carr, I., & Williams, C. (2009). The mediation of representative council of learners policy in Western Cape schools (1997–2003). *South African Journal of Education*.
- Chikoko, V., & Magadla, M. (2012). Learner involvement in school governance: Where are we? In *Education leadership, management and governance in South Africa*.
- Conner, J. O. (2022). Educators' experiences with student voice: How teachers understand, solicit, and use student voice in their classrooms. *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice*.
- Danzig, A. B., Borman, K. M., Jones, B. A., & Wright, W. F. (2017). Learner-centered leadership: New directions for school leadership and a national perspective. In *Learner-centered leadership: Research, policy, and practice*.
- Danzig, A., Chen, R., & Spencer, D. A. (2007). Learner-centered leadership: Learning through mentoring, coaching, and professional development activities. *Advances in Educational Administration*.
- Duma, M. A. N. (2014). Learner participation in school governance: The views of learner governors in South African schools. *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*.
- Eke, C. I. (2022). Student leadership: Participation of the representative council of learners in the management of school violence in high school. *Perspectives in Education*.
- Fan, G., & Zhang, L. (2020). Education governance and school autonomy: The progressive reform of K-12 school in China. In *Handbook of Education Policy Studies: School/University, Curriculum, and Assessment* (Vol. 2).
- Gamede, V. W. (2020). Cultural implications for learners' effectiveness as governors of schools in rural South Africa. *South African Journal of Education*.
- Hunt, F. (2014). Learner councils in South African schools: Adult involvement and learners' rights. *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice*.
- Kiltz, G., Danzig, A., & Szecsy, E. (2004). Learner-centered leadership: A mentoring model for the professional development of school administrators. *Mentoring and Tutoring: Partnership in Learning*.

References

- Kruger, J., Beckmann, J., & du Plessis, A. (2024). Non-educator stakeholders and public-school principals' views on the proposed amendments to the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996. *Potchefstroom Electronic Law Journal*.
- Mabovula, N. (2009). Giving voice to the voiceless through deliberative democratic school governance. *South African Journal of Education*.
- Mncube, V. (2008). Democratisation of education in South Africa: Issues of social justice and the voice of learners? *South African Journal of Education*.
- Mncube, V., Davies, L., & Naidoo, R. (2015). Democratic school governance, leadership and management: A case study of two schools in South Africa. *International Perspectives on Education and Society*.
- Mncube, V., & Naidoo, R. (2014). The contribution of school governing bodies in promoting democracy in South African schools: The current trends. *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*.
- Phaswana, E. (2010). Learner councillors' perspectives on learner participation. *South African Journal of Education*.
- Postholm, M. B. (2019). The school leader's role in school-based development. *Educational Research*.
- Santos, I. M., Amatullah, T., Agbenyega, J., & de Souza, D. N. (2024). The influence of student voice on teacher professional learning: A systematic literature review. *Review of Education*.
- Scheer, D. (2025). Leadership, governance, and organizational learning to implement multi-tiered systems of support for learning and social-emotional development of students with general learning disabilities. In *Springer International Handbooks of Education*.
- Sonn, B., Ravau, S., & Santens, A. (2011). Hearing learner voice in health promoting schools through participatory action research. *Perspectives in Education*.
- Soudien, C. (2023). Race, class, and the democratic project in contemporary South African education: Working and reworking the law. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*.
- Sussman, A. (2015). The student voice collaborative: An effort to systematize student participation in school and district improvement. *Teachers College Record*.
- Veriava, F. (2024). The Basic Education Laws Amendment Bill: A case study in transformative constitutionalism beyond the courts. *African Human Rights Law Journal*.