Principals Academy Trust | Capitec Foundation | University of Cape Town Graduate School of Business (GSB)

Leadership at the Frontline: How School Principal Development Transforms Schools

All schools are not created equally – a reality illustrated by the example of Levana Primary School in Lavender Hill, in the heart of the Cape Flats near Cape Town, South Africa. This community, long affected by entrenched poverty and gang activity, presents one of the most challenging contexts for education in South Africa. Schools like Levana Primary educate children who are often hungry and traumatised by conditions in their community.

Gang violence was an almost daily occurrence at the school, but Principal Shamiega Charity credits the Principal's Management Development Programme (PMDP) for giving her the confidence and strategic approach to tackle problems at her school. Armed with the lessons learnt from the PMDP, and supported by private donor funding, she was able to erect a wall around the entire school – putting an end to gang violence on school property and creating a safe haven for learners.

Over the last 12 years, 273 principals across 11 cohorts have gone through the PMDP, impacting nearly 25% of marginalised Western Cape schools. Along with the executive-level leadership training received from the UCT GSB when enrolled in the PMDP, the principals also receive on-the-ground mentoring from retired principals who work as PAT coaches.

Empowering Principals Results in Transformed Schools

PAT was founded to strengthen educational leadership and management in South Africa's public school system. Partnering with the UCT GSB, Africa's leading business school, an executive management programme was created tailored to school principals, positioning them as high-impact leaders in their communities.

"No one can turn a school around other than the school principal, not the national or the local education department. It's all on the principal who understands the school: the teachers and the learners, the context of the school and the community," says PAT co-founder and coach Bruce Probyn.

"We wanted to build a pipeline to improve the impact of principals on schools, which improves the performance of the teachers and improves the performance of learners," says Jodie Martin, GSB Head: Executive Education. "Improved

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school leaders mean the performance of our university-level graduates will improve, and our executive education levels will improve, meaning we put better leaders into the market. This investment has the potential to create this huge ripple effect."

Business School Training Combined With Coaching & Mentoring

The PMDP programme has three equally important pillars: academic input from the UCT GSB; coaching and mentoring of principals through PAT; as well as in-classroom support to teachers from PAT's Teacher Support Programme. "As the leading business school in Africa, we have an accountability to our leaders to provide them with the necessary business acumen skills and personal mastery tools, to lead self, lead others, and lead their organisations for positive impact, and promote global citizenship," says the UCT GSB's Martin.

The academic programme, the first pillar, runs across four modules over 10 months, with 16 days of contact time covering systems thinking, personal mastery, operations and financial management in education, transformational leadership, and an applied action learning project.

The second pillar centres on learning through PAT-led coaching. For three years, principals are coached and mentored by experienced past principals who bring wisdom and insight to their discussions. Coaches can support principals in applying their theoretical and academic knowledge gained at their time at the GSB to the complex circumstances of their schools in the Western Cape, such as Shamiega faced in her school.

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> **PAT co-founder and coach**

Principals Learn From Other Principals

PAT's retired principals bring over 300 years of combined experience as school leaders, who spend hours building relationships and trust to enable principals to have the confidence to develop their own solutions to the realities of their educational journey. "Our strength is that we are retired principals with the wisdom and experience of years of involvement in school leadership, who are determined to put something back into South African education," says Keith Richardson, PAT CEO and coach.

Gold Winners | Category: Ecosystem Development

Following a needs analysis and after consulting principals and partners, the PMDP was custom-designed in response to the central question: What does a 21st-century school look like, and what kind of leadership is necessary to get there?

Outcomes were defined as principals being able to **manage**:

- **Self**, by gaining personal mastery skills
- **Complexity**, by applying systems thinking
- **Staff**, by optimising team functioning and successfully delegating
- **Schools**, by acquiring business acumen and operations management skills
- **Learner wellbeing**, by improving academic performance, wellbeing and discipline
- **Context**, by promoting change with parents, alumni and surrounding communities.

"principals really matter"

(Wallace Foundation, 2021).

The Teacher Support Programme was later added by PAT to support the principals in the transformation of their schools by also assisting teachers with tools and techniques in the classroom.

Why Small Wins Matter

Research shows that principals are key levers in driving performance at schools. As the authors of a definitive two-decade study on principal efficacy note, "principals really matter" (Wallace Foundation, 2021). The report, *How Principals Affect Schools*, published by the Wallace Foundation, links principal behaviour directly to outcomes such as learner achievement, absenteeism, and teacher retention.

Setting targets for small wins is important as they build confidence and empower individuals to aim for larger goals. This reflects the view of acclaimed University of Michigan psychologist Karl Weick, who argued that large social problems should be broken down into smaller, concrete, and achievable goals (Weick, 1984). "Breaking problems down into a series of more modest steps, all on the path to the ultimate goal, reduces fear, clarifies direction, and increases the probability of early successful outcomes – boosting support for further action" (Weick, 1984, *Small Wins*).

The UCT GSB-PAT case study features the voices of principals who share how the programme helped them in their schools. For example, Manyano High School Principal, Nokuzola Malgas, says, "The programme had a huge impact on our school. The pass rate improved substantially to over 90% from just over 40%, thanks to systems thinking and improved curriculum delivery and monitoring."

Similarly, Mseki Primary School Principal Philani Marubelela says, "The GSB-PAT programme helped me to formulate solutions, such as tackling absenteeism. Once we improved that, academic results improved by 10–20%."

90%

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Spreading Knowledge Across the System

Many principals have gone on to be promoted as Circuit Managers in the Western Cape Education Department, which has enabled the principles of the GSB and PAT to be spread widely around the schools of the Western Cape. Recently, principals who

have successfully passed the PMDP have been given the opportunity to nominate their senior leaders to also participate in a similar leadership course at the GSB, ensuring greater sustainability in the concepts of systems thinking.

"Those senior leadership alumni will have the foundation to engage at a deeper level of cognitive complexity once they attend the PMDP. They will have the language, have practised the model at their school already, and we can push them to a higher and higher level," says Elanca Shelley, GSB Programme Director.

While outcomes can be difficult to quantify, it is clear from the case study that the PMDP is successful. Over the past few years, a significant number of principals coached by PAT have received awards from the WCED for Excellence in School Leadership, in addition to schools receiving academic awards in the National Senior Certificate exams.

There are also many unintended consequences of the PMDP, which have created ripple effects of positive impact on the surrounding communities. The wall built at Levana Primary has provided children with a safe space to practice various sports, which was not possible before. As a result, as of 2025, the school was able to produce provincial players in soccer, netball, hockey and baseball. There are also examples of other school principals who completed the PMDP programme who have started involving parents and local businesses to create soup kitchens at the school to provide meals for pupils. In this way, the PMDP has helped to uplift communities as well as the schools.

For the EiP Case Study competition judges, this initiative exemplified transformational leadership in marginalised communities. Judges praised its clear challenge, creative design, and measurable outcomes, noting its deep systemic commitment and broad societal impact.

Importantly, the case study shares lessons that principals, education experts, donors and teachers from around the world via the EFMD's global network of more than 950 member organisations in over 90 countries can benefit from – chiefly that it is not resources, but specialised training and peer-to-peer learning that can transform struggling schools. This is a powerful reminder that leadership development can deliver an outsized impact even in times of budget cuts and rising pressure for quality education.

The PMDP illustrates that by transforming principals, schools can be transformed as well. As Richardson says, "Our role is not just to improve results, but to empower principals by giving them the necessary skills and qualities to run their schools with confidence."