



2025

Leadership Dialogue

Optimising the Networking of Education Actor Groups

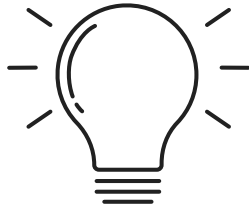
Strengthening Social Capital and Political Trust



basic education

Department:
Basic Education
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA





Thirteen years since the founding dialogue, the NECT resolved to organise another Leadership Dialogue to determine ways in which to strengthen and optimise the networking of education social capital in South Africa.

01: Dialogue Mandate

The trustees of the NECT wish to extend their sincere appreciation to the organisations, educators, and experts listed below, whose valuable contributions of time and expertise have significantly informed the ideas presented in this document.

List of Contributors

Mr. Sizwe Nxasana - Chairman, Dialogue Preparation Committee

Prof. Godwin Khosa - Dialogue Preparation Committee

Prof. Ihron Rensburg - Dialogue Preparation Committee

Ms. Futhi Mtoba - NECT Trustee

Minister Siviwe Gwarube - NECT Trustee

Mr. Nkosana Dolopi - NECT Trustee

Prof. Brian Figaji - NECT Trustee

Mr. Hubert Mathanzima - NECT Trustee

Mr. Khulekani Mathe - NECT Trustee

Mr. Basil Manuel - NECT Trustee

Contributing Organisations

SADTU - South African Democratic Teachers' Union

NAPTOSA - National Professional Teachers' Organisation of South Africa

NATU - National Teachers' Union

PEU - Professional Educators' Union

SAOU - South African Teachers' Union

NASCEE - National Association of Social Change Entities in Education

BLSA - Business Leadership South Africa

Union Representatives

SADTU

Mr Magope Maphila – President

Mr Mugwena Maluleke – Secretary General

Mr Nkosana Dolopi – Deputy General Secretary

NAPTOSA

Nkosipetule Ntantala - President

Mr Basil Manuel – Executive Director

NATU

Mr Sibusiso Malinga – President

Ms Brenda Mbatha – Vice President

Mr Doctor Ngema – General Secretary

Prof Sitwala Imenda – Director: NATU Teacher Development Institute

PEU

Mr Mkhuseleli Dubula – President

Mr. Peter Boase – Vice President

Mr Jabu Madonsela – General Secretary

SAOU

Mr. Paul Sauer – Executive Officer

Mr. Adel Jacobs – Representative

Mr. Johann Guldenpfennig – Representative

Ms. Maryna Besseling – Representative

Dr. Huw Davies – Representative

A: Dialogue, Collaboration and Education Improvement

Founded in July 2013 on the basis of a Leadership Dialogue which was held on 6 December 2012 against the backdrop of national macro-development planning and the instabilities that characterised the preceding years, the National Education Collaboration Trust has promoted dialogue among key actor groups in the education improvement space.

Thirteen years since the founding dialogue, the NECT resolved to organise another Leadership Dialogue to determine ways in which to strengthen and optimise the networking of education social capital in South Africa. Strong social capital and widely felt political and social trust are critical ingredients for stability in the education sector.

Based on historical experiences, stability in education can be understood to encompass operational contexts that are free from disruptions of learning and teaching and have a focused and capable administration that optimally exerts its efforts to marshal resources and energies for the implementation of policies and programmes.

Conditions lacking a genuine, lived sense of trust are likely to rob the education sector of the stability, critical energy and networking of efforts that are necessary to sustain education improvement. The post-June 2024 political configuration in the country has made it necessary for the sector to look for and ensure that the critical success conditions to take education improvement forward remain in place.

B: 12 Years of Joint Efforts to Strengthen the Education System.

Since being established on 16 July 2013, the NECT has made remarkable strides in driving long-term education reform and transformation in South Africa. It has done so by focusing on teacher professionalisation, effective leadership, state capacity building, resourcing, community involvement, and learner wellbeing.

The NECT has to date:

- Directly impacted over 130,000 teachers across 22,812 schools, representing around 25% of the country's teaching workforce;
- Distributed more than 35.2 million learning support materials to systematise and boost teaching in the schools;
- Spearheaded an initiative to strengthen 75 education districts whose primary role is to drive improvement in the 24,879 schools;
- Worked with over 60% of district and provincial officials responsible for Reading and Numeracy in an effort to refine the school improvement discourse and practices;
- Consistently worked with all the teacher unions to support their teacher development efforts;
- Completed 80% of a R135 million upgrade of the South African School Administration and Management System (SA-SAMS);
- Completed over 90% of the R725¹ million upgrade of sanitation facilities for teachers and learners in 750 rural schools.



What is the Mischief?

The NECT was established as a response to the NDP and the immense sector tensions that were undermining education delivery and improvement at the time.

- Civil rights organisations were frustrated and resorted to litigation.
- Teacher unions were dissatisfied and resorted to protests.
- The private sector continued (mis)-investing an estimated R10 billion in a desperately unaligned and competitive manner. The DBE's strategic attention was deflected and dissipated by the tensions.

The result was a situation of LOW TRUST, underexploited SOCIAL CAPITAL, sub-optimum utilisation of TIME ON TASK and a destructive NEGATIVE ENERGY.

¹ Approximately R650 million came from government funding and R100 million from the private sector.

2012

Leadership Dialogue



The State and Future of Public Education in South Africa

In 2013, a Dialogue of education actor groups discussed the NDP Challenges against the then current state of affairs, identified 23 key issues which saw the adoption of the Education Collaboration Framework (ECF) and ultimately the founding of the National Education Collaboration Trust (NECT) on 16 July 2013.



C: The Courage to Act

Noting the benefits of collaboration over the past 12 years and the new dynamics brought about by the reconfiguration of government in 2024, the NECT resolved to organise a two-stage dialogue process to reflect on developments in collaboration over the past eleven years, the lessons learnt and current conditions in order to formulate proposals for the future.

The first stage entailed a strategic listening exercise with key actor groups and founding members of the NECT to establish the content and the approach of the envisaged Leadership Dialogue.

A NECT leadership group comprising the Chairman of the Board, Mr Sizwe Nxasana, the Chairman of the Education Dialogue Group, Prof Irhon Rensburg, and the CEO of the NECT, Dr Godwin Khosa, met, listened and engaged with the leadership of the following organisations:

- South African Democratic Teachers' Union (SADTU);
- National Professional Teachers Organisation of South Africa (NAPTOSA);
- Professional Educators' Union (PEU);
- Suid Afrikanse Onderwyser Unie (SAOU);
- National Teachers' Union (NATU)
- National Association of Social Change Entities in Education (NASCEE).

* Discussions with the business sector are pending. A background papers has, however been developed to guide these discussions.

The listening exercise was undertaken on the premise that there is instructive historical experience and current political changes which suggest that:

1. Maintaining good levels of trust, networking and tapping into education social capital created stability and an environment more conducive to learning and teaching.
2. It is desirable to sustain and strengthen the education social capital, especially in the context of the new Government of National Unity (GNU).
3. There is a sense of weakened actor group ties and growing tension linked to the political transition.
4. There is a potential for the politicisation and polarisation of the system, from the highest tier to the classroom level.

Experiences from elsewhere in the world suggest that the tensions in political leadership transitions are a result of:

- 1) An incorrect tendency to dichotomise politics and administration;
- 2) The inherent tension between 'professional knowledge-based practice' and 'political particularisation'; and
- 3) The absence of a MODEL for political transitioning in administrations;
- 4) South African public service has 'no working experience' with political transitions in the administration (in the democratic era);
- 5) Personalisation of Public Sector Bargaining breeds difficulty.

During transitions, all parties face vulnerabilities: job insecurity, a need to understand the sector, the fear of loss of power and influence.

MEANWHILE, tensions and instabilities are characteristic of a change in political leadership, even in the context of the continuation of a governing party: public service bargaining (PSB) with politicians is normal.

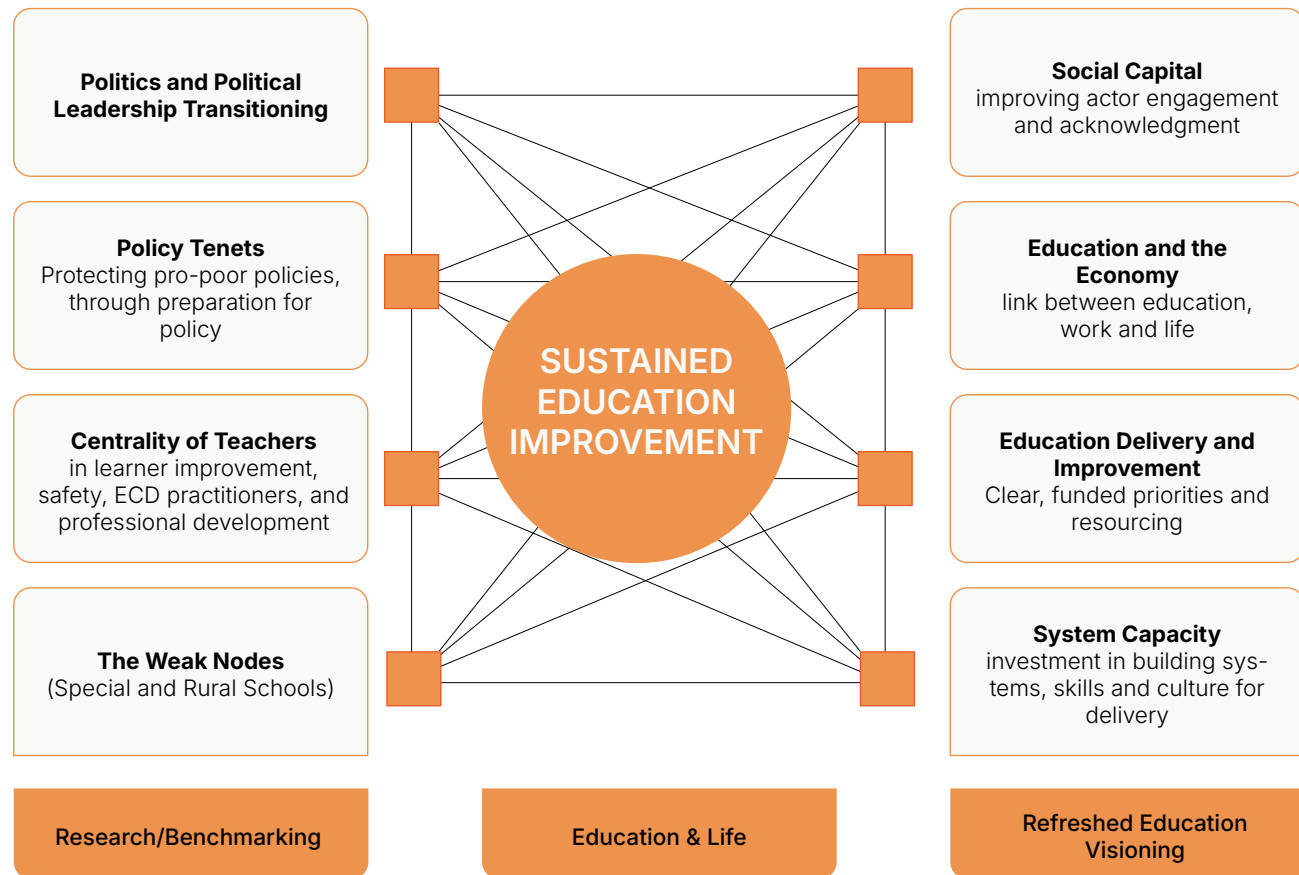
D: Principles for Managing Political Leadership Transitions

Change in the political leadership of the public service brings into focus the question of whether politics and administration are separate.

Tension is certain, even when such change happens within the same political party; it is more pronounced when the change involves a change in governing parties, bringing about political particularism.

Although there are not many studies on political leadership transitions, the available literature suggests the following as some of the principles for ensuring smooth transitions:

- Avoid caricaturing bemoaned ideas: rather remove shortcomings and build on strengths.
- Focus on pursuing sound governance and improved delivery as the goal of the partnerships, and not seeing the partnership itself as the end.
- Recognise the primacy of complementarity and reciprocity among actor and stakeholder groups.
- Manage the transition as a proactive and on-going process characterised by interaction, reciprocal influence, mutual deference among the key players, and stock-taking with periodic adjustments.
- Leverage the tension to promote the outcomes of good governance and delivery.
- Corporatise PSB instead of personalising it.



- Recognise the fact that the public service plays the roles of both agenda-setting, together with political leadership, and implementation.

In line with the approach, the following sections present a set of issues that require the attention of the Leadership Dialogue - either as insights to be hinted at or matters for further discussion.

The issues were abstracted from the various listening exercises to come up with a set of common

issues. In this way, the issues raised in the various discussion groups were carefully grouped into constructs.

The constructs were arrived at by abstracting lead concepts (or key messages) from issues raised by all the participants. This approach thus delinks the key issues from the actor groups, thereby allowing a systematic categorisation and prioritisation of the issues for discussion at the Leadership Dialogue.

E: Sustaining Education Improvement Post-2024: Emerging Themes and Insights for Dialoguing

1. Politics and political leadership change

The listening session established a commonly held view that the new political configuration of 2024 sent shockwaves through society and the administration, the education sector included.

Not anticipating the change in the political leadership of the DBE across political parties appears to be the source of the shock, especially among the teacher unions.

The collective of the union leadership however acknowledged that -

In their nature, political leadership changes create tensions, even in the context of changes that take place within the same political party.

An example was given of the multiple years it took to build a sound, trusting relationship between the teacher unions and the previous Minister of Basic Education, Minister Motshekga.

- Commitment, consistent effort in the building of relationships and the use of intermediaries were cited as some strategies for creating a stable leadership environment.
- It was proposed that shielding the public from the 'temporary' tensions of the leadership changes was important and a suggestion was made that difficult issues should be discussed behind the scenes to avoid confusing the sector and the public.

- The retention of the former Deputy Minister was appreciated since it helps with the continuation of critical institutional memory. In addition, the contributors welcomed the government-wide embrace of the concept of an 'administrative state' which decouples the state from politics, keeping the administration intact in spite of the political changes.

- The suggestion was offered that during political leadership changes, focus should shift from national politics to educational imperatives, including making sure that there is continuity in the delivery of crucial services and that education continues to work, maintaining high performance levels and safeguarding the working conditions of teachers.

- The modus of engagement - Minister should engage with the sector in a manner that doesn't offend teachers (3)

2. Cross actor-group engagement: Yielding to others and capitalising on commonalities

Whilst stakeholder and actor group collaboration and cooperation are regarded as key and essential in driving a stable and progressive education system, all contributors bemoaned the multilateral lack of trust among them. In particular, there was a concern among teacher unions about the continued negative representation of the teacher unions by the media.

Teacher unions would welcome recognition of their growing role in teacher professional development over and above their *raison d'être* of safeguarding the rights of teachers. In South Africa, teacher unions have started playing a strategic balancing

role in society in general and among traditional and professional unions. In addition, teacher unions would like to be recognised for playing a critical role in averting disruptions to learning and teaching time, even when there were vexing circumstances such as the 2023/24 disagreements about salary increases.

"Even when unions were faced with heavy salary negotiations, there was avoidance of 'war talk'. [The union] has proved itself to be a 'controlled, disciplined unitary organisation- its leadership has investigated and addressed issues before they erupted to disrupt the sector".

Tensions and uneasiness between the teacher unions and the Minister were widely vocalised post the 2024 reconfiguration of government. Whilst there have been differences in their views, the teacher unions appreciated the initial engagement between them and the Minister and have called for a follow through with systematic consultations on pertinent matters affecting the education sector.

NASCEE reiterated its concern about the under-engagement and utilisation of NGO capacity in the country. Where loose networking has been a major challenge for NGOs, both pre- and post-1994, the birth of NASCEE should be seen as a part solution to this longstanding challenge.

NASCEE leadership offered increased support to the sector and would like to increase its contribution to education based on clear priorities and programming from the DBE. Care needs to be taken against corporatising NGOs to the point where they lose their unique role in society, including reaching where government and the private sector can't.

The over 170 NECT-initiated dialogues which involved over 127 000 people, have contributed to reducing perception gaps among actor groups and fostering a common vision for education improvement.

A call was made to involve more youth in the education dialogues since they are the group most affected by education and training issues.

It may be useful to establish some bilateral memoranda of understanding (MoU) between the key parties, especially between teacher unions and the private sector bodies on the one hand, and between NASCEE and the teacher unions, private sector and government respectively on the other. Such MoU would reinforce the vision for education improvement and improve investment decisions.

3. Policy tenets and resourcing-priorities

Much concern is attached to policy as an instrument of change. Central to the proposals made by the various participants is the need to demonstrate continued commitment to pro-poor policies concerned with the redistribution of opportunities to poorer learners.

"Consciousness of the fact that the challenge of unemployment and education affects blacks mainly, whereupon 55% of the unemployed are functionally illiterate, education being the solution. Ownership and property patterns are still very skewed in SA."

Proposals regarding pro-poor actions extended beyond resourcing to ensuring access to quality education, fighting hunger and ensuring learner safety.

The proposals included the following:

- Ensure the stability of funding for critical line items such as school transport and nutrition. The DBE must ensure that basic resources are in place in schools. In this regard, the norms and standards established for school funding need to be protected.
- Develop a clear macro-position on the budgeting for and financing of education into the future. With all the challenges they face, workers should not be inconvenienced with other issues such as the non-payment of retirees' leave pay. Concern was raised that the buying power of teachers' salaries is still at the 2017 level. A comprehensive funding plan comprising short- and long-term strategies was suggested.
- Build an economic case for Early Childhood Development (ECD) in order to move the debate to tangible investments and levels of effort. There is a need to build institutions following the registration drive.

On language policy, the following matters were highlighted:

- Implementation of Mother Tongue-based Bilingual Education (MTBBE) requires dedicated resources; in some cases, new teacher allocations will be required, and systems must be put in place to manage specific school cases with unique language profiles.
- Mother tongue view is not a view of the Afrikaans speaking people. It was acknowledged that there are however school governing bodies (SGBs) that are taking extreme positions, making inclusivity difficult.

- There is a need for more in-depth thought on the policy implementation processes relating to initiatives such as Learners with Special Educational Needs (LSEN), robotics and MTBBE. The initiatives are not properly planned. Little or no training for teachers is provided and a lack of resourcing for classrooms frustrate teachers and schools.

- The General Education Certificate (GEC) will not serve the purpose of a qualification if it is not externally moderated and examined, and there is a risk of energy and resources being dissipated. Policies such as the 3-Stream model are not backed by supporting documents. Discussion and policy documents need to be developed so as to create a firm basis for rollout planning.

4. The centrality of teachers in education improvement

The centrality of teachers in education needs no reiteration. They are the engine of day-to-day education delivery, its reform and transformation.

They constitute the most dynamic and largest investment in education. The views about the importance of the teachers are underscored by the following quotation-

"Recognise and address the centrality of teachers in all the reform and improvement initiatives. There must be a comprehensive plan that recognises that teachers need to implement the various reform initiatives – avoid reform and intellectual capacity overload and provide sufficient resourcing."

The following sub-themes emerged from the various inputs:

4.1. Preparation and production of teachers

- Teacher preparation and production require a sustained systematic and strategic discussion between the DBE and the Department of Higher Education (DHET).

4.2. Teacher professional development

- Comprehensive planning is required for teacher professional development. Whilst acknowledging the historic teacher preparation gaps, professional development should promote teacher autonomy.
- This should be so in spite of the fact that education should learn from the private sector approaches that can progress learning and teaching into the future.
- Teacher unions need to work together on specific areas to attain a critical mass, for example, Assessment for Learning.

4.3. Teacher institutes

- Arrangements must be undertaken for teacher professional development institutes to be recognised by government and other players in the sector – the DBE, DHET and their entities, universities, and funding organisations.

4.4. Teacher provisioning

- There is a need to address the shortage of teaching staff. Qualified staff should be engaged for quality education.
- In this regard, dedicated budgets and resourcing should be provided, especially for Grade R and ECD – a model for providing qualified

teaching staff for these early grades needs to be explored.

- Challenges relating to the teacher baskets should be addressed proactively before they create a crisis.
- The rural incentive for teachers needs to be pursued to redress prevailing imbalances.
- The idea of teacher assistants was welcomed – perhaps a pathway(s) should be built for them to ensure some sustainability.

4.5. Teachers' safety

- The security dangers teachers are exposed to in schools was brought to light. These related to both learners and community members who have free access to the schools.
- Whilst security is a national concern, the safety of teachers requires a reassessment and actions need to be taken on security enforcement in schools.

5. Strengthen the link between education and the economy

Discussions on how to strengthen basic education and training on the one hand and the economy on the other need to be revisited.

Challenges relating to 'foundational and functional skills' which are critical for the economy require increased attention.

Central to these challenges is how we put the teachers at the centre; "responding late with 'entrepreneurship training' is not sufficient".

6. Education improvement

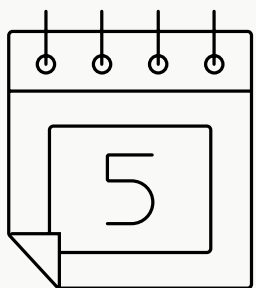
While the education system has continually constructed a comprehensive ensemble of sound policies over the past thirty years, there is a need to align policy implementation across the tiers of the system, from the national level to the schools.

While the DBE's Action Plan and the National Development Plan's education chapter contributed to creating alignment, a renewed assessment could help to unify and reenergise the national vision and efforts towards education improvement.

A call is being made for a refreshed, national 'public' vision for education, backed by a set of goals and resourcing requirements. The sentiment behind this call is captured in the quotation below:

"We need to be clinical about where the pressure lies in the system and an objective identification of policies that can and may not be implemented taking into account the budgetary circumstance and the political value-system."

In this regard, the NECT proposed a systematic processing of the 'policy-context complexities' into a Multi-Year Learning Improvement Plan.



Multi-Year Learning Improvement Plan

Outlines a clear set of a few levers, for example, CDP, planning and resourcing;

Is sufficiently funded with government funding which is supplemented externally with non-state funding;

Uses and builds the internal capacity of the state;

Is supported by developmental monitoring and corrective measures to ensure implementation fidelity and learning;

Is backed by a multiyear classroom resourcing plan;

Has an advocacy plan that increases the national focus on and energies dedicated to education improvement;

Is based on and supported by key policies.

7. Building system capacity for sustainable education improvement

State capacity is crucial for sustainable education improvement. Concerns were raised about the capacity of the department – at national, provincial and district levels – to marshal resources and process policies into actions that bring tangible change in classrooms.

Government is being called to systematically work towards building the requisite systems, skills base and culture to drive education delivery and improvement in the longer term.

The following insights and observations were highlighted:

7.1. The DBE needs to deliberately work on specific critical skills to maintain the system, some of which include policy analysis and writing skills.

7.2. The district tier needs to be brought into the limelight and strengthened to increase its role in supporting and monitoring schools. The hollowing out of the districts is a concern and so is the overspend on salaries.

7.3. The capacity in the system to monitor and report adequately is low. The COVID-19 emergency brought out this observation, where the various tiers of the education system were unable to yield quick, valid and reliable decision-making data.

7.4. South Africa needs to attend to provinces that are failing in the administration of education

7.5. Professionalisation of senior management in

the public service is a strategic priority that the department should look into. A deliberate senior management development programme for the entire education sector is required.

There is also a view that –

"Good people retiring from the system and not being replaced. NGOs could foreground the bureaucracy through attachments and secondments options and opportunities."

8. Paying attention to the weak nodes

The largest elements of the education output – participation, progression rates and pass rates – are driven by a focus on mainstream functions and larger sub-systems. For instance, over half of the learners in the system are found in four provinces – KwaZulu-Natal, Gauteng, the Eastern Cape and Limpopo.

Whilst these areas are critical and need to be well-maintained, concerns are surfacing about the place and the treatment of non-mainstream functions and sub-systems.

In this regard, a call is being made to carve out a place for LSEN, small, multigrade schools and the smaller provinces. These categories of institutions have unique operational dynamics that are not fully accommodated by the mainstream strategies and approaches.

A call is being made to recognise the special sub-systems that are part of the education system but do not benefit from mainstream processes.

9. Other Niggling Stones

The following range of issues were raised for focused discussion:

- 9.1. International benchmarking must recognise that South Africa is competing outside of its league and is being compared with the best in the world. In this regard, South Africa should be benchmarked against countries with similar socio-economic profiles.
- 9.2. The informal extension of school into weekend and night schools is bad for the system and also creates an opportunity for social ills such as rapes and teen pregnancies to occur - they happen but are often unrecorded.
- 9.3. The widespread existence of gender-based violence and sexual incidents in schools must be recognised and acted against.
- 9.4. We need a refreshed country vision for education, which the public must get behind.
- 9.5. Government needs to take learner and school connectivity more seriously and act urgently and decisively to provide increase in schools.

10. What then should the Leadership Dialogue focus on?

The Leadership Dialogue should focus on shifting the teaching and learning dynamics by:

1. Disaggregating issues of agreements and disagreements;
2. Disaggregating the issues it engages with into macro-, meso- and micro-levels issues to

ensure more efficient and focused processing of the many complex issues;

3. Pitching conversations along the lines of what turned the fortunes in education systems such as Zimbabwe;
4. Bringing in some DHET representation to ensure integrative thinking about education and training;
5. Confirming the common courses, teasing out the differences and building a broader common basis for discussions;
6. Working towards an agreed way forward;
7. Communicating outcomes publicly to rebuild and strengthen confidence in the state;
8. Being continuous and undertaking regular stocktaking, adjustments and communication.

2022

Leadership Dialogue



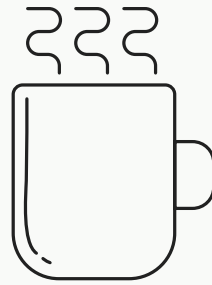
Strategic Reflections on Education Reform and the Future Role of the NECT, February 2022

In 2021, the NECT Trustees discussed the founding proposals and design elements of the NECT with a view to project the future of the NECT, and its positioning in the national efforts to recover the educational losses resulting from Covid-19 disruptions and the pursuance of the national macro-economic development goals.



The intention of the dialogues is to create an avenue for open, honest engagement among key stakeholders such as the teacher unions, student organisations, civil society organisations, business and Government. The dialogues [are] non-partisan and inclusive, giving all individuals and organisations the opportunity to explore joint societal actions.

(Education Collaboration Framework, 2013: 13)



A dialogue is a conversation in which:

- People who have different beliefs and
- perspectives seek to develop mutual understanding;
- Stereotypes are softened and more trusting relationships developed;
- Participants gain fresh perspectives on the costs of conflict and begin to see new
- possibilities for interaction and common actions;
- All have the right to contribute; and

Those taking part pay attention to their impulses, feelings and opinions and work to uncover the deeper meaning underlying their thought processes.

A dialogue is not:

- A debate, mediation or conflict-resolution exercise;
- About winning or losing.

Herzig and Chasin, 2006¹ and Maiese, 2003²[illegible]

This image shows a blank sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.



 +27 12 752 6200  info@nect.org.za  www.nect.org.za

 G Floor, Block D, Lakefield Office Park 272, West Ave, Centurion