

# **The opportunities and challenges facing independent schools – South Africa 2017: a view from St Stithians College**

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## **Introduction**

The themes to be addressed in this paper are: the diversity and ecology of independent schools; the imperatives to be embraced by independent schools; and the value and intent of private-public partnerships. The presentation will highlight the variety of independent schools, and their contribution to the ecology of South African education. Secondly, in relation to the current context, the presentation will critically examine the opportunities and challenges facing independent schools as they implement the principles and values of the national Constitution and as they educate citizens of our country. It is time for independent schools to take serious stock of their purpose and intent, with this emphasis in mind. It is also critical to address directly issues of race and racism. Thirdly, at a time of sea changes in education nationally and internationally, and sharing the same national imperatives, there are important opportunities and responsibilities to explore in furthering public-private partnerships involving independent schools, public schools, the education department, education NGOs and corporate funders.

## **The Diversity and Ecology of Independent Schools**

It is important to recognise the wide diversity of types of independent schools, while also being clear on the main points in defining the independent 'sector'. If schooling is understood as an ecological system, then it is also vital to understand the kinds of roles independent schools do and can play in a healthy ecology of South African schooling.

I begin with an outline of definitions, as I understand them as a leader of an independent school. The *South African Schools Act* (SASA) of 1996 established a national schooling system for the post-apartheid era, creating an integrated framework from the balkanised structure of apartheid education. The SASA defined and recognised two categories of schools: public and independent. Public schools are state-controlled, state-funded, located on state land, and managed through the national Department of Basic Education and the provincial Departments of Education. The category of public schools includes departmental schools which are located on private property. Public schools are defined on a range of funding provision, with a commitment for the state to fully fund Quintile 1-3 schools and partially fund Quintile 4-5 schools. The first category (Quintile 1-3) consists of no-fee schools, while schools in the second category (Quintile 4-5) are entitled to charge fees approved by the School Governing Body.

Independent schools are required to register with the Department of Education, to comply with national laws and education regulations, and to be accredited by the state's quality assurance entity, Umalusi; but they are privately owned entities governed by boards which reflect this private

ownership. In this sense, these schools are 'independent' of direct departmental management. They have areas of discretion in their governance and management, within the constraints of laws applicable to privately-owned institutions. As a result, the terms 'private' and 'independent' are inter-changeable, although each term carries nuances of emphasis.

The term 'private' emphasises the nature of ownership, while the term 'independent' carries greater focus on choices, priorities and institutional character which flow from governance and management process that are not determined by public officials in the Education Department. In the political lexicon, 'private' and 'independent' can be both pejorative and praiseworthy, a space to be attacked and a space to be defended.

As private trusts or companies, independent schools are broadly divided into two categories, as per the Companies Act of 2008: Non-Profit Companies (NPC) and Profit Companies (PC). Schools which are NPCs typically register as Non-Profit Organisations (NPOs) for taxation purposes and their motive is not to generate profits from their operation. NPC schools are mostly reliant on annual school fees and school investment funds for their revenue. Any annual surplus is re-invested back into the entity and stays on the balance sheet. Schools which are For-Profit are typically financed through annual school fees and a shareholder structure which seeks to derive a profit on private investment while delivering the educational service.

The differences between Non-Profit and For-Profit schools are just one aspect of a myriad of differentiators within the independent sector. There is a wide range of school fees from high-fee to low-fee. Current regulations create a mechanism for co-funding between parent fees and departmental subsidy for independent schools where the fees are below a defined level. Typically, higher-fee independent schools offer variations on a holistic model of schooling, while lower-fee schools focus on a narrower offering. A minority are specialist schools in the Arts or Sport. Wherever independent schools are located on the spectrum of tuition fees, these institutions are educational enterprises which need to operate according to a sustainable business model. Annual budgets are shaped by considerations of strategic priorities, affordability, attracting and retaining quality staff, funding operating and capital costs, cash flow, investments and fundraising.

There are independent schools which have a religious character, and schools which are explicitly secular. There are co-educational schools and single-sex schools. There are primary and secondary schools, and there are Pre-Primary to Matric (K-12) schools. There are schools which teach the national curriculum, assessed either through the Education Department or through the Independent Examination Board (IEB). There are schools which teach to a variety of alternative curricular frameworks, including international curriculums, faith-based and faith-shaped curriculums, and curriculums grounded in specific educational methodologies (such as Waldorf, Montessori). There are independent schools which select only academically able students; while others have a more academically inclusive enrolment approach.

There are independent schools which are amongst the oldest existing schools in South Africa (going back to the 1840s and 1850s); and there are brand-new schools which are being built in large numbers in response to South African urban sprawl and the growing market demand for alternatives to public schooling in the present. There are schools which are historically white and historically black, reflecting apartheid pasts and the continuing imprint of these racial categories and geography. There are schools which are transforming away from these legacies, some rapidly and others slowly, as our society de-racialises its social structures, particularly through the growth of black middle and upper classes.

I wish to argue, in concluding this section of the paper, that – as in the natural world – a rich and diversified ecology of schooling in South Africa is, in principle, good for the country. The economic, technical, social and cultural needs of South Africa are diverse and dynamic. We need an adaptable and complex education system to advance and meet these needs and to create new opportunities, so moving towards a society that is recognisably different from our apartheid past. This system rightly includes both public and independent schools. It is worth reflecting that there has been a global expansion of privately funded and managed schools – in developing economies in particular – and so South Africa’s experience is not exceptional. Within the bounds of national policy, the benefits of a diverse and dynamic educational system are evident. Through active participation in quality assurance processes, including Umalusi accreditation, IQAA evaluation and a number of international association review structures, independent schools contribute significantly to setting national benchmarks for educational excellence.

The critical point to make, however, in advancing the positives of a complex ecology of South African schooling is to stress that the dominant relationships should be inter-dependent rather than hostile. There should be a ‘both and’ mentality, rather than an ‘either or’ one. This is the basis for hope of a better future for our land and its people. Public and independent schools inhabit the same society and, broadly, our intent should be aligned. Exploring the spaces of synergy, co-operation and mutual respect between public and independent schools is a key priority. The GDE’s Summit with Independent Schools is an important opportunity for taking forward this mindset, and I return to this in the final section of the paper.

### **Educating citizens of South Africa’s present and future, and advancing the Constitution: taking a critical look at the purpose and intent of independent schools**

Purpose and intent are contained in school governance documents, in mottos and taglines; and are lived out daily through expressed values, programmes, relationships and outcomes. Independent schools (and, I might add, all schools) have three critical sets of questions to ask of themselves as they hold up a mirror:

1. How clearly does a school understand its reason for existing, and how well is this expressed in a Statement of Intent and Purpose?
2. Does the Statement of Purpose and Intent contextualise the school in and of South Africa’s (and Africa’s) present and future? Specifically, does how does the school seek to educate citizens and to advance the Constitution?
3. How far is there alignment between the Statement of Purpose and Intent, on the one hand, and the daily life of the school? How are words on the page and expressed principles lived out in practice? What responsibilities do the governing body and management of the school take to review, develop and ensure this alignment?

In the case of St Stithians College, I have been clear as the Rector and Executive Head that I have a special responsibility for working with the College Executive and with the Council (governing body) to define and advance our [Statement of Intent and Purpose](#). The current document was approved by the Council in 2015, after an 18-month period of formulation, and confirmed again in 2017 after a review was undertaken.

There is not space here to give a detailed outline for the rationale of the St Stithians Intent and Purpose. Suffice it to say that such a guiding statement should be both descriptive and aspirational in relation to the school’s reason for existing; and it should be a short, well-considered document

with words and meanings carefully chosen. St Stithians is a College of seven schools, consisting of primary and secondary boys' and girls' schools, together with a co-educational junior primary school. The College is an independent, non-profit institution located on an African highveld campus in Sandton, Johannesburg. In addition, St Stithians incorporates Kamoka Bush School near Modimolle, and the Thandulwazi Maths & Science Academy on our campus.

The second question above addresses the extent to which independent schools articulate their intent to contribute to nation-building and the creation of a post-apartheid society. In *Learning: The Treasure Within* (UNESCO, 1996) the four pillars of education are defined as 'Learning to Know; Learning to Do; Learning to Live Together; Learning to Be'. While many schools will focus on the first two pillars – the acquisition and assessment of knowledge and skills, this is too narrow a definition of educational purpose. The second two pillars – the inculcation of values and the development of social and emotional intelligence – are often included in definitions of holistic education. Many independent schools consider holistic education a hallmark of their offering. Given this, how many independent schools make explicit reference to educating citizens of South Africa and to the necessity of building a new society which is significantly different to the country's apartheid legacy? In reflecting on this question, the national Constitution represents a foundational framework in defining the new society we should strive to create and in articulating the values of this society. A second question flows: how do the purpose statements of independent schools articulate with the Constitution?

In applying the challenging insights and questions outlined above to the St Stithians Intent and Purpose, I select the following phrases of the Statement:

"St Stithians College is a proudly South African school, embracing diversity and offering a distinctive educational experience."

"...to contribute as African and global citizens."

"Create a community of belonging among our students, staff, parents and alumni."

"St Stithians College is committed to the positive transformation and development of South African society. We seek to embrace *ubuntu*, to be *One and All*."

In implementing its Intent and Purpose, St Stithians is guided by core policy documents, by our [Strategy 2025 Framework](#) and Master Plan 2053 which looks forward to the centenary year. Having a strategic approach, and one which asks critical questions, is an important way to ensure alignment and focus in implementing a school's Intent and Purpose. In relation to the imperative for independent schools to educate citizens for South Africa's present and future, the following three of the six themes of *Strategy 2025* are particularly relevant:

1. Defining our School Character
2. Creating a Community Engagement Curriculum
3. Promoting Institutional Advancement and Sustainability through a Community of Belonging

By addressing 'school character' as a strategic imperative, space is created for asking challenging questions about what kind of school we want St Stithians to be. What are the values, assumptions and core features of the College as a Methodist Church School? What should be changed to make the College more relevant, transformed and inclusive of diversity as we journey from being an all-white school founded in 1953 and which began to enrol black students from 1980 onwards? This is a lively and engaged conversation space.

The intent to create a community engagement curriculum seeks to commit St Stithians to making an impact beyond the school gates on our wider community in greater Johannesburg; and to learn from the relationships forged. In the process, South African citizens are educated and the College grows its role as a corporate citizen. The term 'engagement' commits the College to building community partnerships, with schools and church organisations as a primary focus.

The long term institutional and financial sustainability of St Stithians is the focus of the College's 'advancement' strategy. Underpinning this intention is the creation of an active 'community of belonging' amongst present staff, students and parents and among alumni and past parents. 'Belonging' is a challenging and stretching concept for a school: how do members of the school community feel included? And how excluded? What traditions and assumptions need to be questioned, given the historically white culture of the school, the increasing enrolment of black students and the predominance of white people in leadership positions? How do individuals from diverse social and cultural backgrounds come to know one another and so break down the stereotypes that are such an engrained feature of South African society with its highly divisive past?

There are many worthy initiatives a school can undertake to promote a sense of belonging, including events, rites of passage, communication and intentional acts of connecting. Here, I mention just a few initiatives. The first was the termly meeting of the Strategic Planning Group at the end of 2016, where we ran a day workshop aimed to sensitise the College's leaders to unconscious biases, stereotyping and prejudice. The second was a Staff Development Day at the beginning of 2017 for the 420 staff employed at St Stithians. The staff were divided into groups of 15 people, intentionally mixing individuals from across the schools and the administration departments. The programme of the day was 'Circles of Connecting': staff members were asked to share their life stories, to reflect on their identities as South Africans (or other nationalities), and to talk about how they felt they belong, or do not belong, at St Stithians. Through parent-teacher committees, through student committees, staff forums, chapel services the themes of 'identity and belonging' are a special focus at present at St Stithians. The Teaching and Learning Committee is addressing opportunities to decolonise the curriculum.

At Founders' Day 2017, when the whole school community gathered in a crowd of around 5,000 people, I stated in the Rector's Address as I engaged with the theme of belonging:

"Who am I? Who are we? How do we feel that we belong? How do we feel that we do not belong? What do we stand for? What do we stand against? Why is stereotyping so pervasive? How aware are we of our unconscious biases? How aware are we of the assumptions that we make?"

The silent and submerged factors which erode and undermine our sense of belonging are the most difficult to identify, challenge and reshape. The ways in which we share and grapple with these profound questions today shape the promise and the pitfalls of the future.

To be relevant, meaningful and purposive, a St Stithians education should seek to equip us to be thought-leaders and lead-practitioners in this landscape of belonging.

- What is the 'head' of our belonging – how much do we know about each other, and the multiple contexts of our communities?
- What is the 'heart' of our belonging – how much do we empathise with others, create relationships, embrace diversity as a common good?

- What are the 'hands' of our belonging – how much do we live out a generosity of spirit, lives of connecting, serving and contributing?

To be the head, heart and hands that seek to build, not to break down; hope, not despair; connect, not disconnect; love, not hate.

At Stithians we educate individuals to live out Saints Character, so that our students and staff can Know myself, Be myself, Make my contribution.

This mantra puts authentic identity at the heart of a St Stithians education:

If we belong, we share a common set of values

If we belong, we contribute

If we belong, we assume responsibility

If we belong, we stand for what is right

If we belong, we are affirmed and we affirm others

If we belong, happy fulfilment flows -- those evocative words on the foundation stone of our College."

### **Addressing race and racism head on**

It is essential that schools, and particularly schools which are historically 'white' schools or are located in predominantly white residential areas which are experiencing growing numbers of black homeowners, address race and racism directly and intentionally. This emphasis is part and parcel of the education of South African citizens who are ready to embrace the present and create new futures. The constructs of race and racism run deep in contemporary South Africa, particularly amongst adults who are the opinion-formers and the parents of children at school.

It is important that we develop a common understanding of race and racism. 'Race' is a term which is used in society to describe individuals, or groups of individuals, who are physically categorised by the colour of their skin. Race is a social construct which draws on, and emphasises, these physical differences, particularly between a binary world view 'white' and 'black'.

Racism is about categorising people with reference to skin colour in ways which are demeaning, derogatory or patronising.

Racism is multi-faceted and needs to combine the following insights in a working definition:

Racism is rooted in worldviews developed through history – particularly for our time, of transatlantic slavery, European colonialism from the 1800s to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, and in South Africa of apartheid as a particularly long-lasting manifestation of this colonialism. At the heart of apartheid was the creation of a racially discriminatory society that favoured white people and suppressed black people. Apartheid died politically in 1994, but structurally, economically, culturally and psychologically, apartheid remains alive and pernicious into the present. Apartheid thinking and consciousness remains deeply engrained amongst South Africans, often reinforced in subtle ways. There are many unconscious biases and stereotypes that affect our worldviews, both as white and black South Africans.

We need to sharpen our understanding of the shadows of apartheid. We cannot deny them. Given the history of colonialism and apartheid, racism has been, and is still today, characterised by white people wielding power in a particular way that is, or can be perceived to be by the recipients, as demeaning, derogatory, undermining or patronising. In the context of schools, this enduring legacy

places a particular burden and responsibility of insight and accountability on white people who are in positions of authority and power, as administrators, teachers, or coaches. This is a burden and a responsibility, but also a good opportunity for listening, growth and self-reflection.

It is critical that schools, and here the focus is on independent schools, create safe and engaged spaces for addressing anger, fear, anxiety, frustration and hope in relation to race relations as we build a South Africa that honours our national Constitution and embraces a different future for our society. We need to engage our staff, students, parents and alumni in these critical conversations. The focus is justifiably on racism, but close behind are sexism, homophobia and other destructive and demeaning social pathologies.

St Stithians College adopted a [Transformation Statement](#) in 2009, and in August 2017 published a [Statement on Race and Racism, Transformation and Diversity](#). These official pronouncements, rooted in our values as a Christian school, are backed up by the creation of Council, staff and student transformation and diversity committees; the appointment of staff and student leaders in our schools into transformation and diversity portfolios; and the design of school programmes which explicitly integrate transformation and diversity agendas. Our student admissions procedure has an explicit transformation agenda, and our approach to employing staff is increasingly influenced by employment equity targets. Our procurement policy is currently under revision to create more explicit BBBEE criteria. As the Rector, I have seen it important to 'lead from the top', creating an enabling context for these transformation and diversity initiatives. It is important to articulate both what the College stands for and stands against. Current initiatives are to draw up an Anti-Racism, Anti-Sexism and Anti-Homophobia policy which explicitly addresses future transgressions by staff, students and parents of the College's code of conduct.

In the Rector's Address at Founders' Day 2016, I urged the community of St Stithians:

"Let us be a College where we think before we speak.  
Where we listen before we pronounce.  
Where brotherhood and sisterhood include one and all.  
Where we drive out derision of the other.  
Where we talk openly and courageously about our hurts, fears and hopes.  
Where we define racism and sexism, and act against it.  
Where we celebrate diversity of race, culture, class and gender.  
Where dignity is affirmed.  
Where we Honour God, Self and Other.  
Where we enable each individual to know self and be self."

### **A future way: public-private partnerships**

Alongside the important contributions of South African schools to citizenship, national-building and value formation in transformed post-apartheid society, the educational space is undergoing rapid change – particularly in the emphases on thinking skills and eLearning. The expectations and competencies of teachers need to undergo change and re-skilling. The teacher of ten years' time will require a skill set that is different from that of today. Compounding the schooling system's ability to respond to, and embrace these changes, the gulf of social inequality is reflected in continuing wide discrepancies of quality across schools.

Given that many of the better-resourced independent schools occupy the frontiers of these changes, and sees them as opportunities, an argument can be made for the importance of these schools

entering into partnership agreements with public schools, and perhaps units within the education department, to work together. The GDE's Schools of Specialisation concept is a good example of public schools taking the initiative to embark on school improvement plans, and this is another area of potential cooperation with independent schools. Public-private partnerships will need to be carefully and purposefully entered into, so that there is mutual growth and benefit, as well as sustainability. It is likely that 'brokers' will need to be appointed both in public and independent schools, and perhaps in schools associations, to create and grow these partnerships.

In the case of St Stithians, the creation of the 12-year old Thandulwazi Maths and Science Academy is an important example of a private-public partnership, with a high BBBEE profile and an emphasis on black beneficiaries and specifically women. Funded largely through corporate social investment and private donations, together with an allocation from the St Stithians annual budget, the Thandulwazi Academy has grown into a significant educational initiative. The Academy is growing in stature as the seventh school of St Stithians and impacts on 2 500 students and teachers annually. The programmes are based on the St Stithians campus, but include a satellite teacher programme in Limpopo.

Throughout the year, some 1 000 Grade 9 to Matric students from 160 public schools in greater Johannesburg attend classes on Saturdays at St Stithians: they study Mathematics, Life Sciences, Physical Sciences, English and Accounting. On 11 Saturdays, pre-primary and primary teachers attend Teacher Development Workshops run at St Stithians, with a similar programme being offered in the Sekhukhune district of Limpopo. The third leg of the Thandulwazi Academy is the employment of forty teacher interns, who are registered for distance learning qualifications (weighted towards Mathematics and the Sciences) and work in the schools of St Stithians. This is an immersion model of teacher education. The intern programme represents a significant contribution to the future cadres of high-quality South African teachers.

St Stithians is considering how to extend and replicate the model of the Thandulwazi Academy. An online teaching and learning platform is an obvious option to pursue. Furthermore, the intention is to grow firmer relationships with a core of public schools whose students and teachers participate on a voluntary basis in the Thandulwazi Saturday School and Teacher Development Programme. This initiative would dovetail with the growth of a community engagement curriculum, outlined earlier in the paper as a strategic initiative of the College.

Many independent schools have 'community school' initiatives which seek to link with public schools. The challenge and opportunity is to grow these into sustainable and multipliable projects. To do so requires new vision and determination on behalf of the leadership and governing bodies of independent schools and a matching intent by public school and education department leaders. A working committee in Gauteng would be an excellent initiative to advance this joint cause and develop a strategy that could take public-private partnerships into areas not yet envisaged.

## **Conclusion**

The spirit of this paper is to endorse the intentions to create a positive and engaged relationship between independent and public schools, under the umbrella of national policies, as we jointly address the pressing challenges and opportunities of our society. We should strive to create a healthy ecology, embracing the benefits of diversity. For independent schools, at this time in our country's history, it is vital that there is an intentional and strategic focus on educating citizens and inculcating the seminal principles of the national Constitution. Indeed, this imperative is pressing for

all South African schools. How do our schools stand up when they look in the mirror with these questions in mind?

Using St Stithians as a case study, I have outlined a number of steps taken on the College's strategic transformation journey as a proudly South African school. Reflecting on my role as Rector and Executive Head, I have sought to set the tone and create direction. The stance taken by the leaders of schools is critical. Alongside the priorities of creating excellence in 'Learning to Know' and 'Learning to Do', schools should be both safe and challenging spaces as we advance 'Learning to Live Together' and 'Learning to Be'.

The way forward for independent schools is to open to engaging in multiple and purposeful partnerships that draw public and private schools into common projects with worthy goals. Rather than turning inward, independent schools must think and act 'beyond the school gates'. The Thandulwazi Academy at St Stithians is one example highlighted, and there are many more. We do so at a time when the context and methodologies of education are changing rapidly, requiring adaptation and fresh thinking.