

CREATING  
A CARING  
SCHOOL

A Vision of  
the School as  
a Centre of  
Care and  
Support

# Guide

# 1

## Writers

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# A vision of the school as a centre of care and support

## Introduction

### ***Creating a Caring School - guides and tools***

Much has been written about the HIV and AIDS pandemic in South Africa and about the many initiatives aimed at preventing HIV and AIDS. However, little attention has been given to the question of how best to support learners who are HIV positive or whose lives are *affected* by HIV and AIDS. For example, how can learners who are absent from school, either because of illness or because they are looking after ill family members, be enabled to continue learning? What systems exist in schools for supporting vulnerable learners?

In response to this challenge, *Saide* undertook extensive research into school-based care and support initiatives. We visited schools across seven provinces and recorded the examples of good practice that we found. Our first key finding was that many learners in South Africa are vulnerable for a range of reasons. We realised that the definition of vulnerability needs to be a wide one that includes not only children made vulnerable by HIV and AIDS, but also all children rendered vulnerable by *any other* socio-economic causes such as poverty, physical or sexual abuse, alcohol and drug abuse etc. Like the White Paper 6 *Special Needs Education* (DoE: 2001b)<sup>1</sup> which also defines ‘vulnerability’ in this broad and inclusive way, characterising HIV and AIDS as being, just one among many barriers to learning.

Based on the evidence that we have collected, the second key finding was that schools *can* and *do* make a difference. We found pockets of excellence in the remotest rural areas as well as in inner city and township schools. Our research convinced us that all schools have the potential to slowly and systematically put into place measures that will help them become sites of care and support.



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We carefully examined what works and what is “doable” in schools and used this information to develop ***Creating a Caring School - a Guide and Toolkit for School Principals and Schools Management Teams***. The four guides and accompanying sets of tools that you will receive are excerpts from the ***Creating a Caring School*** publication which offer a practical approach to managing support for vulnerable learners in schools in diverse contexts.

## **How is the role of school management conceptualised?**

Educational policy in South Africa is largely premised on the notion that the school principal and the School Management Team (SMT) should provide leadership and management both in the school and beyond the school walls - in the broader community (South African Schools Act 1996<sup>ii</sup> and in the National Policy for HIV and AIDS for Learners and Educators in Public Schools 1999<sup>iii</sup>).

Our research confirmed the existence of an extremely wide spectrum of schools in South Africa with very varying management capacity and resources, dependent largely on the context in which schools are located. It is therefore unlikely that it will be possible to develop a management approach that will suit all schools. Instead, the strategies proposed in this guide are intended to assist principals and SMTs to think about and plan the approaches that are most appropriate to their school and contexts.

## **The structure of the guides and tools**

The guides are intended to assist school leadership and management to understand why and how a particular strategy, method, or idea is useful, and not to just be a “how to” manual of tips. Yet, the resource as a whole is, at the same time, intended to be relevant at all times to the context and practice of the School Management Team. Therefore, we have included a set of tools offering realistic exemplars, check lists, and a set of information management tools that demonstrate approaches and methods for recording, planning, managing and monitoring implementation of a range of care and support interventions.

You can read and download a free copy of the whole ***Caring Schools*** publication at: [www.saide.org.za](http://www.saide.org.za) or on the OER Africa website [www.oerafrica.org](http://www.oerafrica.org) where you will also find a number of other resources for free download.



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## Case studies

We found principals in the schools we visited in different provinces in the country, who are working in poor communities and who have managed to support vulnerable learners at their school. Here are three case studies that show what can be done. For the sake of confidentiality we have changed the names of the schools and the principals.

**Read the case studies and identify support actions that the principals managed to organise in their schools.**

### CASE STUDY 1: VALUE-BASED, PROACTIVE LEADERSHIP

**Oxford Girls' Primary School** is situated less than 5 km from Johannesburg's city centre. Established 90 years ago, it is one of the oldest schools in Johannesburg. Over the years, the community that the school serves has changed considerably from the children of what was largely a middle class, Jewish community to the children of a predominantly black African community. This contemporary community is comprised, mainly, of immigrants and refugees from neighbouring African countries, in particular, French speaking refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

Mrs Smit, the principal, has identified that **90% of the 500 learners are vulnerable children (OVC)**. This means that the majority of children in the school require some kind of socio-economic or psycho-social support. About 200 children (40% of the total enrolment) are from refugee families and, as such, have a range of psycho-socio and economic needs that require special attention. This high percentage of OVC at the school means that there is a great need for care and support in a range of spheres within the school community. As a quintile four school, **Oxford Girls' Primary School** does not receive food from the provincial nutrition programme, despite serving a predominantly poor community with high rates of unemployment. Applications to the Gauteng Department of Education for learners to be considered for the nutrition programme have been turned down without reasons being provided. Thus, **the school has taken responsibility for feeding between 100 and 150 learners** daily. To do this the school has to rely on monetary and food donations as well as fresh vegetables provided by the successful vegetable garden.

In lieu of fees, **parents are asked to volunteer their services to programmes run in the school**. The principal assesses the parents' skills and language levels and deploys them in the school accordingly. Parents are required to volunteer for a term at a time. Some **parents help with cleaning**, some **look after the vegetable garden**, some **work as teachers' assistants in the classrooms** and one parent **assists with the school's aftercare programme**. In addition, Mrs Smit has integrated a **schoolwork/homework support system** in the daily programme to offer learners academic support and she has established an **aftercare facility that is open during school time and in the holidays**. This facility is managed by the Grade R teacher.



The principal has also **identified a Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) that offers counselling**, the Johannesburg Parent and Child Counselling Centre (JPCCC). She has entered into a contractual agreement with this organisation: the contract involves identifying vulnerable learners and following through with the necessary support actions.

The principal is, however, very "hands on" in managing this process and is meticulous about keeping records regarding vulnerable learners and home visits. The counsellors also report back to her (in broad terms) so that she is fully informed about which learners may need additional support.

The proactive leadership of the principal has made a huge difference in this school. Through her commitment, insight and values-based leadership she has invested in training and motivating her staff to be part of an integrated and systematised approach to supporting learners and enabling them to access quality education.

While the School Governing Body (SGB) does not have the capacity to provide the strategic direction and oversight envisaged in the SA Schools Act, Mrs Smit draws the SGB into her planning meetings and receives a lot of **assistance from the SGB members**. Because the school actively supports vulnerable children, it enjoys a positive relationship with the community in terms of support and respect. This can be seen through the high level of parental participation in school activities and functions.

## CASE STUDY 2: STRATEGIES FOR SOURCING SUPPORT

**Vuwani Lower Primary School** is a rural school situated in a poor community in Limpopo where unemployment is rife. The few people who do work are employed on the surrounding commercial fruit farms. Subsistence farming supports most people; an activity that is totally dependent on the weather. Vuwani is a quintile three school and every learner is required to pay R50 school fees per year. But the principal, Mrs Ndukwana, states that the annual default rate is in excess of 50%. The school, with a total of 688 children, has a favourable teacher-learner ratio of 1:30. As there is no running water, the school is dependent on a borehole from which water is pumped into tanks. Vuwani School does not have a telephone line or email facilities and the only way of communicating with the school is through the principal's private cell phone. While the school has three donated computers, limited computer literacy on the part of the staff renders these almost unused. The school is connected to the ESKOM grid with electricity primarily used to run a photocopying machine and computers which are located in the principal's office. The principal's office also has to double up as a library and a storage room for school equipment.

According to school records, 30 learners have formally been identified as orphaned and vulnerable children (OVC) and, of these, 14 are estimated to be affected and/or infected by HIV and AIDS. The school records do not list learners who are orphaned directly as a result of HIV and AIDS, nor is the problem of HIV and AIDS infection talked about openly in the community. **However, the majority of learners are vulnerable because of their poor home backgrounds**. Mrs Ndukwana commented that most learners stay with their siblings or with relatives, and as a result, regular food supply is a challenge.

Poverty causes the school to rely heavily on support from government sources and from external donors. After realising the constraints posed by poverty in the community, Mrs Ndukwana looked actively for external support.



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She has approached and **drawn in support from various provincial departments** involving them in the school's development. **The Education Department** has helped with infrastructure development as well as training on record keeping and school administration. **The Department of Agriculture** helps with the school garden, while the **Department of Health** contributes educational posters and assists learners in going to the local clinic. **The Department of Water** provides water when the borehole does not work.

When Mrs Ndukwana arrived at Vuwani in 1997 there were not enough classrooms and many classes were held under trees, the school grounds were not fenced and accessing water was extremely challenging. But the principal had learnt about accessing donor funds from her experiences at another school.

Today, the school has five classroom blocks that accommodate all learners and the school had sufficient space to plan for the extension of the school to include Grade 5 in 2009. Three of these blocks are relatively new; one was built through the assistance of the Department of Education while the others were constructed through **funds from the Japanese Embassy**. The Centre for Community Development (CCD) started a **Women's Project aimed at raising funds for school fees through building and sewing; this led to the involvement of the National Development Agency (NDA) which began by supporting salaries for the men and women who worked in the Women's Project**. The NDA's involvement soon spread to capacity building training for teachers, school managers and the school governors. Mrs Ndukwana has also **secured the help of local businesses**, and one bus company supplies free transport as well as food and dishes for special occasions like HIV and AIDS days.

**The principal has organised her staff into teams to work on various aspects of school development and learner support**. Apart from the SMT that implements policies, committees have been established for OVCs, health and hygiene, nutritional diet, the school garden and for psycho-social counselling for learners. These committees are answerable to the principal and to the SMT. Thus, the principal remains constantly aware of what is happening in the committees. She also plays a pivotal role in supporting the committees through mobilising resources.

Mrs Ndukwana says that the SGB is too weak to make meaningful contributions towards school development, the SMT reportedly has problems in getting members of the SGB to attend meetings since the latter are usually busy fending for their families on the surrounding commercial farms: most activities in the school are, therefore, driven by the principal and her SMT. Although there is no active SGB, the principal has been able to mobilise a tremendous number of resources from external agencies.

## CASE STUDY 3: MANAGING INTERVENTIONS

**Zama Intermediate School** is located in a semi-urban area with the atmosphere of both rural village and urban township. The school is neat and well maintained with a good fence. Two large gardens dominate the grounds at both ends of the school. The school has running water, electricity and a number of computers for administration, but no e-mail. While the school has a library, it does not have a computer laboratory. Extra mural activities like soccer, netball and volleyball are offered on the fairly good sports grounds. The principal describes the SGB as being 'very good and active'. They run the school finances with a vigilant eye and oversee the maintenance of the school buildings.



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The school has a total of 34 teachers with two of them being paid for by the SGB. Zama school is a quintile one no fee school with 1 223 learners; Of these, 192 learners are officially considered to be OVC however, there are in fact **many more learners at the school who are at risk** and, therefore, in need of additional support. The principal, Mr Molefe, estimates that there are about 72 learners who are affected or infected by HIV AND AIDS. **A School Based Support Team** including learner representatives - looks after the interests of OVC in the school. By **conducting home visits**, the team is able to identify problems that learners face outside the classroom.

When Mr Molefe became principal ten years ago he immediately recognised the challenges faced by the community and his learners.

For example, many learners came to school hungry, many were unhealthy and quite a number demonstrated behavioural problems consistent with abusive home environments. In addition, a great number of learners lived in child headed households. The principal felt that he needed to assist the learners by offering them **medical and nutritional support**. He tried to source assistance from government departments but this was not sufficient. Mr Molefe soon realised that he would have to look outside the school and the Department for help.

With the support of the School Based Support Team (SBST) **Mr Molefe approached several external individuals and organisations for assistance**. His efforts in this regard were extremely successful and today **a number of organisations and local businesses work with the school, offering a range of different support services to the learners**. Save the Children (UK) implements its 'Caring Schools' programme at Zama. As part of the Save the Children programme, **READ** (another NGO) also became involved at Zama. The READ programme provides literacy resources as well as science and sports equipment. READ also offers some teacher training, particularly in the field of literacy. Mr Molefe also initiated contact with **Thusanang**, an NGO that did some training at the school in the field of rights and responsibilities. **The Roman Catholic church** working in that region was also approached. They offered financial support for food, training for the kitchen staff and support with maintaining the school food garden. Their contribution effectively supplements the nutrition programme provided by the Department of Education which is insufficient to meet the needs of the learners at Zama. The school also made links with **Soul City** and runs the Soul Buddies programme as part of its aftercare initiative.

The principal's role in setting up and maintaining this network of support for his school has been both in making the initial contacts and in maintaining contact and liaising with these organisations on an ongoing basis. Where specific contracts have been set up between the school and an external organisation (like Save the Children) Mr Molefe monitors the school's adherence to the terms of the contract. In short, his role in managing the external support is crucial.

Of significance is the fact that Zama Intermediate School is one of the few schools in our study in which the impact of HIV and AIDS was fairly openly acknowledged. The principal also spoke about the need to address stigma and discrimination and suggested that the Life Skills programme could play an important role in tackling this problem.



## Comment

*All three schools are determined to offer the best possible education, even if their situation is bleak. Their caring is practical and this makes a huge difference in the lives of the learners concerned. The principal in the first school came up with an innovative way of involving poor parents. In lieu of monetary support, she gets parents to volunteer their services in different ways, e.g. cleaning, looking after the vegetable garden, helping teachers in the classroom and in the aftercare programme.*

*In one case, caring involved building more classrooms, and making the school clean and safe. For all of them caring involved taking action that resulted in appropriate activities to support learners.*

*All three schools have networked with NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations), CBOs (Community-Based Organisations) church organisations, government departments and business. The principals have involved them in various ways to provide support and funding which enables the schools to offer support to learners that contributes to overcoming barriers to learning. The services offered by external agencies include support for nutrition, after-care programmes, setting up and maintaining school gardens, health services, counselling services and funding. It is impressive that even schools with very limited resources could find extra support through networking.*

*In the course of our site visits we noticed that in schools which offered care and support to learners, the SMT responded to their obligation to care with action. They (1) identified the problem and (2) did something practical to help solve the problem. The caring initiatives of one person often resulted in others becoming involved and helping with the care. In many cases, the caring activities became part of the daily running of the school, monitored and supported by the SMT.*

## A caring school

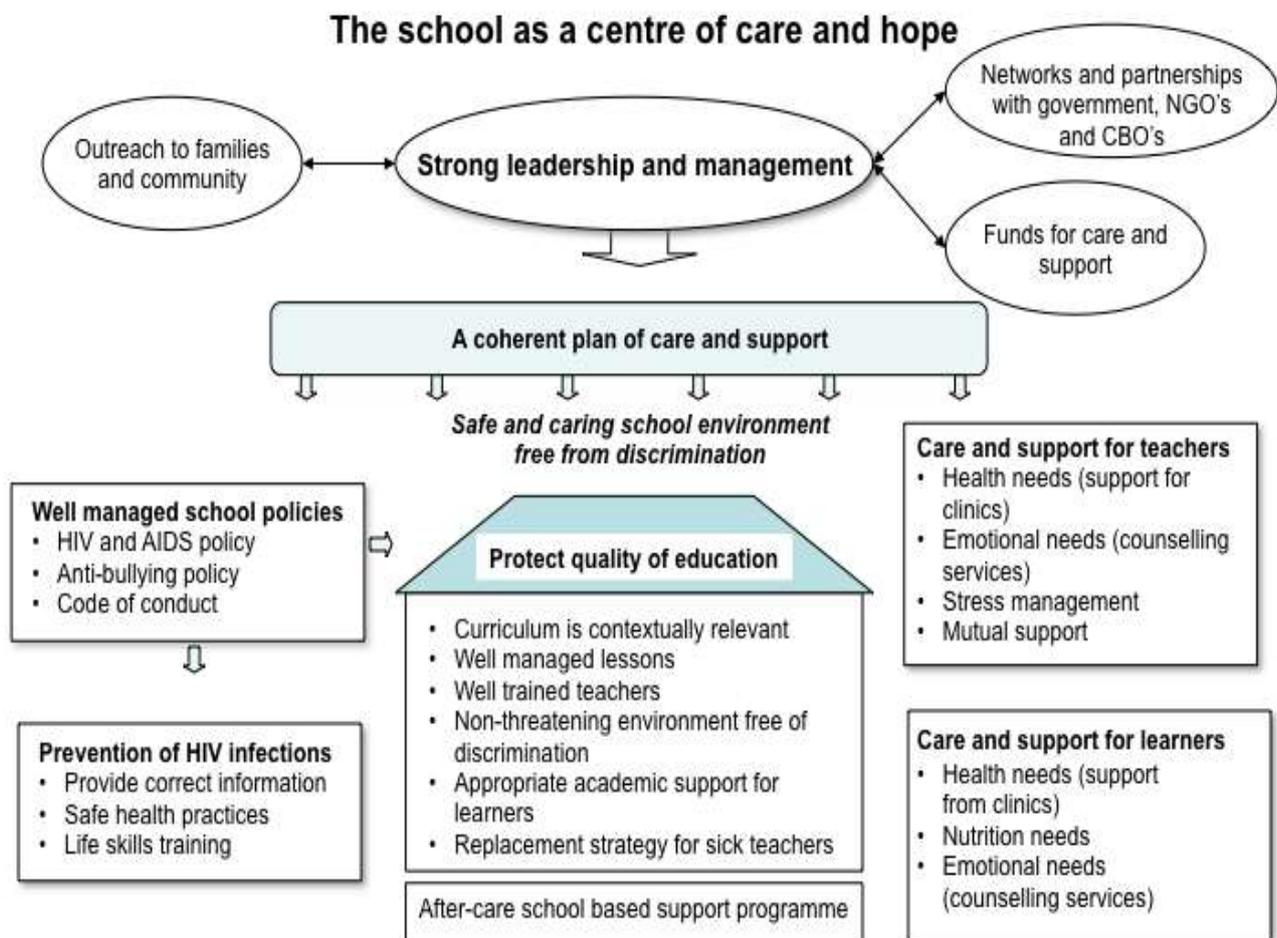
The above three case studies give us an idea of what a caring school could look like. But we know that not all schools will think about and provide care in the same way. There will be different needs in different communities and different resources.



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There are also many different ways in which each school can respond. So what are the essential ingredients of a caring school? In the diagram below we sketch some of the key elements that are part of a caring school.

However, schools are all at very different stages with regard to the implementation of care and support systems for vulnerable learners. Each school has to interpret and work within its own context. For some, strengthening the existing national nutrition programme may be a priority; for others it may be the challenge of establishing some or all components of an aftercare facility or setting up a referral system.



When caring becomes part of the shared vision of a school, it is easier to make it part of the core business of schooling, and create the climate in which learning takes place. But is it that simple? Let's reflect on your leadership and management role in translating the vision for your school as a centre of care.



## The role of management in creating a caring and supportive school environment

The principals depicted in the three case studies were the drivers for change in each school. They all wanted a school in which learning was possible, and so they translated this vision into actions to meet identified challenges.

### Comment

*The diagram - the school as a centre of care and hope – above, shows that management has to take an overarching responsibility to manage, monitor and maintain all aspects of a caring school. A comprehensive, coherent and well-developed plan guides the implementation of clearly defined policies and actions.*

*This is the time for courageous leaders to embrace ‘deep change’ that will make their schools part of the solution by responding proactively to the social challenges of HIV and AIDS, poverty and violence. In an article in The Times, Jonathan Jansen refers to the crisis in education and emphasises that:*

- The dismal performance of so many of our schools is not the result of a lack of resources, but the inability of schools to turn resources into results.
- Even in dismal circumstances, the single most important factor influencing educational outcomes is the quality of the school leadership.
- In schools where there is structure, discipline and predictability, the pupils are more likely to achieve educational success.

(Jonathan Jansen: 2009)

*Management holds the key to turning the current crisis into new opportunities to which schools must respond. Daunting though the task is, management does not need to go it alone: the principals in the case studies did not try to change things on their own. They managed to share their vision and enlist others to help them, be it the school staff, the community, government departments or outside organisations. We will deal with setting up these types of partnerships and networks in more detail in Guide 3.*



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## Tips for school leaders

In reflecting on the important role of leadership and management in creating a caring and supportive school environment, we identified some leadership tips which we believe may be useful.

1. A vision for a caring school must be rooted in an accurate understanding of the context so that it can be translated into smaller practical and doable steps.
2. The principal and the SMT must demonstrate leadership by taking the initiative to prioritise areas for development and then develop a strategy to get wider support.
3. It is important to work as a team and set achievable goals for the school. Principals must be careful not to overburden the staff, but find ways to support them.
4. Networking is a critical part of the school's action plan. Few schools can manage to do everything on their own without outside help therefore, setting up networks of support is a key competence which principals and SMTS should strive to develop. However, it remains the responsibility of the principal and SMT to manage the services and support that has been elicited from outside of the school. This is where clear contracts that specify what will be done by whom, where and when, are crucial.
5. The principal and SMT take full responsibility for ensuring that outside assistance is relevant and supports the school's vision of a caring environment and does not interfere with the core business of the school.

## Comment

*Unfortunately, schools with a shared vision for caring are still the exception rather than the rule. Many principals have reported that they struggle to get parents and teachers to buy into their vision, because they do not seem to care: this raises a critical leadership question. Can people be taught to care? Let us reflect for a moment on some practical examples. If the teachers in a school have a good understanding of the rights of a child, and they understand how hunger and abuse undermine these rights, no real caring has taken place yet. Caring begins when the principal and teachers act on this insight. It begins, for example, when they*



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*identify and feed the hungry children in their school. If we want to turn a shared set of values (vision) into practical caring responses, we need to do specific management tasks. For example, does the school have a good system for:*

- *identifying vulnerable children?*
- *referring vulnerable children that need support? Is there a way of tracking their progress?*
- *supporting vulnerable learners to catch up on classwork missed and for helping all learners with homework?*
- *providing basic after-school care for vulnerable learners?*

*Another critical question is whether the school nutrition programme is well implemented and managed. It is also to consider whether this programme needs strengthening.*

*These management tasks make it possible for a school to integrate its caring intentions (like feeding the hungry) into its day-to-day business. This includes defining, monitoring and supporting the care responsibilities of teachers, which should be part of their daily work. It is important to keep in mind that if teachers are given clearly defined roles in the school-wide care programmes the school can maintain a caring climate, regardless of the personal beliefs of the teachers involved. **Caring attitudes start with practical actions.***

## Key findings

A key finding of the research we conducted is the importance of implementing a holistic, school-wide intervention that protects and supports orphans and vulnerable learners. Such interventions need to be systematised and taken up by the whole school community in order that they are sustainable. *Ad hoc* initiatives implemented by individual teachers, often become too onerous on the individuals that are offering the support and are therefore seldom sustainable (e.g. a teacher who brings food to feed 12 children at her school. Firstly, it's very expensive for her to keep buying the food and secondly,, what happens when more hungry children are identified at the same school? Must she bring food for them as well? Thirdly, what will happen to the children if she were to leave the school?) This wider focus is not meant to diminish the impact of individual teachers' actions, but rather to plan for interventions that can be systematised and have the potential of making a difference on a larger scale.



## Key points

Various education policies, including the:

- HIV and AIDS policy;
- Special Needs/Inclusive Education policy;
- Tirisano Plan; and
- Guidelines for Educators

All promote the notion of the **school as the centre of community life**. This view is further emphasised by the way in which government is currently advocating that schools play a key role as sites of integrated service delivery.

It is against this backdrop of urgent need and broad policy that we have attempted to create a vision of what a caring school might look like and what role management plays in creating a caring school environment.

## Some important insights gained

1. The national policy framework supports the idea of a caring and supportive school environment in which the effects of HIV and AIDS and associated social issues such as poverty are mitigated through carefully planned actions. HIV and AIDS is one among many socio-economic issues that create barriers for children to develop and grow. School management need to view this social challenge within the wider context of social issues like poverty, violence, alcohol and drug abuse, and sexual abuse that make children vulnerable.
2. The school is a critical role player in the national multi-sectoral strategy to combat the effects of HIV and AIDS. Other role players include district and provincial education departments, relevant government departments such as Health and Social Development, NGOs and CBOs.
3. School leadership is encouraged to forge partnerships and collaboration with relevant role players in their efforts to establish and maintain relevant care and support programmes that cater for the needs of vulnerable learners.



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4. While informal actions of support for learners are commendable, a coherent plan that takes care of key aspects in priority areas as well as being driven by committed and strong leadership has the best chance of resulting in a caring school environment in which there is a systematic and sustainable programme of support.
5. Proper planning for coherent and sustainable care and support interventions start with the collection of reliable school-based data.

## End Notes

<sup>i</sup> Department of Education (2001b) Education White Paper 6 *Special Needs Education: Building an Inclusive Education and Training System*, Department of Education: Pretoria

<sup>ii</sup> Department of Education *South African Schools Act* (1996) Department of Education: Pretoria

<sup>iii</sup> Department of Education (1999), *National Policy on HIV/AIDS for Learners and Educators in Public Schools, and Students and Educators in Further Education and Training Institutions*. Department of Education: Pretoria



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