

THE STATUS AND ROLE OF A SCHOOL MANAGEMENT TEAM (SMT) IN SCHOOLS¹

1. WHAT IS A SCHOOL MANAGEMENT TEAM?

Most public schools have a school management team (SMT), which normally consists of the principal and other senior educators such as the deputy principal and heads of department (HODs). This practice can also be applied in independent schools with the same success. With reference to the corporate environment in which most independent schools function, the SMT could be regarded as the executive leadership responsible for the operational aspects of the school. In good governance practices it is generally accepted that a governance structure would determine policy and strategy for an organisation or corporate entity, whereas the implementation of these policies and strategies is the function of the executives of that organisation or entity.

In the corporate environment,² a Board of Directors, Board of Trustees, a Council or other structures of a similar nature govern corporate entities or similar collectives. This is called the governance structure of the organisation or entity. This structure determines the entity or collective's core business, policies and strategies, whereafter it oversees the implementation thereof. The Board's typical functions can be summarised as follows:

- to determine the core business;
- to determine policy and strategy (vision, mission and values);
- to ensure financial health;
- to provide leadership;
- to assist with public relations and networking;

¹ This document must be read together with the document "An Overview on the Functioning of Independent Schools."

² For a proper understanding of the principles of corporate governance, readers are advised to consult the "King Report on Corporate Governance for South Africa 2002".

- to appoint a Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and manage the CEO's performance;
- to delegate authority to the CEO;
- to ensure compliance with all relevant laws;
- to appoint Board committees;
- to monitor and evaluate board performance and business programmes; and
- to participate in advancing and lobbying issues of the entity.

Again with reference to the corporate environment, the Board would appoint a CEO, who would have the function to appoint senior persons in the organisation to assist him/her in implementing the policies, strategies, etc. determined by the Board. This is called the operational level of the organisation. The CEO is entirely accountable and responsible for the operational side of an organisation, and therefore reports and accounts to the Board concerning all operational aspects. However, the Board should at no stage interfere directly in operational issues. In the corporate environment those persons appointed by the CEO to assist him/her are often referred to as the Executive Committee (EXCO). Normally it is left to the absolute discretion of the CEO as to whom he/she would want to have on the EXCO. A wise CEO would certainly consult the Board on the composition of his/her EXCO, and would consider the structure and nature of the organisation when determining who would be best suited or placed to assist him/her in the entity's operations.

The SMT of a school is precisely the EXCO of a corporate entity.

Neither the Schools Act or any other relevant education laws makes provision for the establishment of SMTs at schools, and therefore also does not prescribe their composition.

2. SPECIFIC QUESTIONS RELATING TO SMTs

2.1 Is the composition of the SMT prescribed?

No, it is not. In fact, an SMT seems to be a foreign concept as far as statutory law is concerned. However, as indicated above, the SMT (in the sense of an EXCO) is not a foreign concept to the principles of good and sound governance and management, and the establishment of SMTs at schools should therefore be encouraged.

An SMT's function will be to assist the school principal in the performance of his/her professional management functions and the functions, powers and responsibilities delegated to him/her by the governance structure in his/her capacity as "CEO" of the school.

2.2 Can the principal dissolve an existing SMT, and elect/appoint a new one from which certain top managers (HODs) are excluded?

Yes, certainly. The school principal accounts to the governance structure for governance and managerial functions, powers and responsibilities delegated to him/her. The SMT would assist the principal in the execution of these responsibilities, and therefore he/she must decide which staff members are best placed, qualified, skilled and suited to serve as members of the executive authority of the school. In this context the word "authority" does in no way give to understand that the SMT has any authority of its own. It derives its authority solely from the principal, and SMT members are therefore directly accountable to the principal for the performance of their functions and the execution of their duties.

Members of an executive structure (such as an SMT) who undermine the authority of the principal, or who are obstructive in the execution of the powers and functions of the principal and/or the SMT, should not and cannot form part of the SMT. In terms of the principles of good and sound governance and management, only the principal can (and should) be held accountable if something goes wrong with the operations of the school.

The principal therefore has an important responsibility to ensure that the right people are appointed on the SMT to assist him/her in the performance of his/her responsibilities.

Furthermore an SMT is most definitely not a “democratic structure” but rather a management tool to assist the principal as the school’s manager (or CEO). Although educators and non-educators of the school may provide input on the composition of the SMT (e.g. by an election process), or particular persons because of their position or seniority in the school might expect to be appointed to the SMT or believe that they are entitled to serve on it, no principal should be bound or should allow him/herself to be bound by such a process, expectation or belief. From the principal’s perspective, the question should remain: Who do I want and need to be able to deliver effectively and efficiently on my mandate?

2.3. What are the SMT’s duties?

There are no prescribed SMT duties.

Apart from assisting the principal in managing the performance of such duties and responsibilities as may have been prescribed to him/her and all educators , as well as functions, etc. that may have been delegated to the principal by the governance structure, it will be the absolute prerogative of the principal to assign duties, responsibilities and powers to the SMT. The entire functioning of the SMT will in fact be determined and guided by the principal.

2.4 Should schools have a certain list of documents in place?

Except for the documents prescribed in SASA, there is no comprehensive or prescribed list of documents that schools are expected to have. However, in accordance with the principles of good governance, all school governance structures should and must have a wide variety of functioning policies and procedures, e.g. an admission policy, a language policy, a policy on religious observance, a financial policy, a risk management policy, an HIV/Aids policy, a human resource policy, a school development plan or policy, etc.³

³ Some of these policies are obtainable from the FEDSAS website (for members only).

2.5 Is it correct to say that the governance structure is responsible for the compilation and revision of various policies?

Yes, indeed.

Very often operational staff under the guidance and supervision of the principal will initiate a process to develop policies and procedures. Such policies and procedures will however not be binding, and will have no effect until they have been approved and adopted by the governance structure.

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