



UCT KNOWLEDGE CO-OP

**Rapid Review:**  
**Delayed Social Grants at Bridgetown High School**

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The UCT Knowledge Co-op facilitated this *Rapid Research* project.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

There are a number of reasons why students delay registration for the academic school year. Delayed payment of Child Social grants has been identified as one of the reasons why students do not register on time. The consequences of late registration are far-reaching, and can affect the academic performance of students and the ability of schools to plan appropriately for the school year.

Enforcement of late registration policies is lenient and concessions are often made that allow students to register after the school year has begun.

## 2. AIM

Bridgetown High School requested the assistance of the Knowledge Co-Op at the University of Cape Town to undertake a rapid review of the challenges that have emerged as a result of delayed Social Grants. The review will concentrate on:

- Impact of delayed registration on learners and the school and strategies to minimize the impact of delayed registration
- Use of parents and the school governing board as an entry point for addressing challenges at Bridgetown High School

The purpose of this report is to articulate how the effects of delayed Child Social Grants impact on Bridgetown High School and to suggest possible interventions. Literature was reviewed to identify best practice among schools that have a high intake of learners that are dependent on social grants and are experiencing late registration.

## 3. PROBLEM

Bridgetown High School is a secondary school located in Athlone. There are approximately 891 registered students at Bridgetown High School from a catchment area of 10 different areas, in very close or close proximity to the school. Of the total number of registered students, 45% receive social grants that cover the costs of school registration fees. The majority of Bridgetown High School pupils fall within low to medium socio-economic status.

There are ***three registration periods for returning and prospective students*** for each academic school year. Yet each year, Bridgetown High School makes concessions for students who do not register on time as a result of delayed social grants. As a result, returning and prospective students can often begin the school year up to ten days after the first day of classes.

The practice of late registration has affected Bridgetown HS in the following ways:

- Late registration has increased pressure on teachers and administrative staff at the beginning of the school term when teachers and administrative staff are preoccupied with meeting the needs of enrolled students. This can be disruptive to teachers and students.
- Students most dependent on grants and are likely to be affected by delayed payment of grants, tend to register when the school's system is overloaded and least capable of meeting their needs. It is also during late registration that there is less time and attention to be paid to those that need this additional support.
- Resources are not adequately distributed when the number of returning and prospective students is unknown.
- Bridgetown High School is unable to plan for the number of staff (i.e., teachers and administrators) required if students are allowed to register two weeks after the start of the school term.
- From an economic standpoint, uncertainty around the number of students enrolled for the school year can result in a loss of fees and other financial revenue.

Bridgetown High School has a responsibility to lessen the impact of delayed social grants on registration for each school term. Therefore a case can be made for *eliminating late registration* or minimizing the extent to which this behavior impacts on the school.

#### **4. MAKING A CASE FOR ON-TIME REGISTRATION**

According to O'banion and Wilson (2013), "eliminating late registration is likely to lead to increases in retention and completion, and it [...] leads to increased faculty and staff satisfaction," which can be beneficial to the overall learning environment. The literature reviewed highlights why is it important for students to register on time and promote good attendance (O'banion and Wilson, 2013):

- Students who register on time (before the first class day) achieve at a higher level both academically and behaviorally, than do those who register late (on or after the first class day).
- On-time registration sends a message to students and to staff that learning and instruction are important every day and every week of the term; this is equally important at the beginning of the school term.
- On-time registration establishes expectations for students to meet deadlines and live with the consequences of their decisions, which may translate into improved workforce habits for some students.

- On-time registration permits faculty to begin the process of instruction the first day of class without the interruption of students who registered late.
- School budgets may suffer when students don't register and attend school consistently. If many students enrolled at a school fail to consistently attend, the school has less money to pay for essential classroom needs. Economically, retention is one key factor impacting the financial well being of an institution. Losing students results in loss of fees and other financial revenue.
- On-time registration improves the student's ability to persist towards the completion of a course thereby contributing to the number of students that have graduated.

## **5. POSSIBLE STRATEGIES/INTERVENTIONS TO ADDRESS THE PROBLEM**

The rapid review was conducted within a tight timeframe, therefore the literature search was restricted to a limited number of sources that were determined to yield relevant results from schools that have a high intake of learners that are dependent on social grants and are experiencing registration delays. We also searched for practical examples of interventions that could address delayed registration. Our starting-point was with literature from Goodall *et al* review (2010), Fiske and Ladd, (2004) and Campbell (2011).

The literature supported interventions that engaged parents and that leveraged school governing bodies.

### **5.1. Parental Engagement**

There is significant evidence that supports parental involvement in children's education and success. Campbell (2011) suggests that schools should employ a wide range of strategies to encourage parental engagement. Furthermore, these approaches should be context specific and consider the special needs of parents.

However, the barriers to engaging with parents often pose a real challenge to school leaders and staff. Literature highlights some of the challenges to the successful implementation of parental engagement strategies:

- Parents perceive schools as presenting obstacles in the form of lack of encouragement, not informing parents of what they can do, and having too little scope for fitting around busy working and family lives.
- Parents face numerous barriers to engagement, including costs, time and transportation, language, low levels of literacy and numeracy, and a lack

of confidence in supporting children's learning or engaging with a school.

- Reaching and involving parents who have chosen not to engage either with their children's school or with their children's learning.
- Lack of staff experience and knowledge of working to support parents in engaging with the school and/or their children's learning.

Literature strongly supports engaging with parents and recognizing the reasons why parents are reluctant to become involved with the school; or at the very least, comply with school policy. It is within the school's control to create an environment that encourages strong partnerships with parents and the school staff.

Based on a review of existing interventions, the following methods for engaging parents include the following:

### **Method 1 Leveraging Use of ICT**

ICT can contribute to improved parental engagement by providing a convenient means for parents to access up-to-date information about their child's learning (Using Data to Improve Schools, n.d.). ICT enables parents to be more engaged with their child's learning and makes it possible for schools to collect valuable data on its students, parents and staff.

Mobile technology is a useful tool for communicating with parents remotely, and can be easily implemented. For parents with limited resources, time, and transport, mobile technology is a means for maintaining regular communication with the school and staying up to date on the progress of their child as well as changes to school policies.

Forms of ICT and remote communication might include (Campbell, 2011):

- Use of school website for information
- Contributing to podcasts
- Contributing to and commenting on school website
- Contributing to and commenting on school blogs
- Voting systems
- Accessing online resources

### **Practical Approach 1a- Online Questionnaire and Feedback Forms**

Online questionnaires or feedback forms give parents the opportunity to say what they think about their child's school. These questionnaires can be administered 2-3 times a year.

This type of evaluation tool is used to source parents' opinion on various

aspects of their child's school; from the quality of teaching, to dealing with bullying and poor behaviour. This is also an opportunity for the school to collect data and to identify its core challenges. Parents should be encouraged to participate in these evaluative techniques online, if resources allow.

### **Practical Approach 1b- Text Messaging Alerts**

A number of schools have incorporated text messaging as a useful tool for communicating with parents. School messaging systems reduce time spent by administrative staff and improve communication with parents. The school will need to explore the range of options for integrated parent communication that allow schools to send electronic communication for parents and for parents to request alerts and notifications, preferably for free. Text messaging alerts can be used in conjunction with email messages, and information posted on the school website (if available). This type of communication must be cost effective, so identifying the proper system or service provider is important. The benefits of this kind of system are the schools can communicate quicker and parents will receive information on time. There is little reliance on students to communicate information to parents. This improves the communication between the parent and the school.

## **Method 2 Platforms for Communication/Dialogue**

The way schools choose to communicate with parents needs to be personalized and fit the context. Campbell (2011) suggests, "formal methods of communication such as a parent council and parents' evenings need to be supplemented by informal opportunities" that allow parents to engage in the discussion as opposed to passive listeners. Literature supports that the way schools work in collaboration with parents and the local community is contextualised and based on strong personal relationships. Communication/dialogue platforms intended to facilitate conversation between parents and the school might include:

- Parent councils
- Parent Forums or Learning Conversations

These forums can be used to address a number of problems such as school policy compliance, non-attendance at school, child behaviour, and parental engagement. Most importantly, the forums can address how (Goodall, 2010 and Campbell, 2011):

- Parents can access advice and support services from the school;
- Prevention and early intervention activities can be promoted;
- Engagement of parents/guardians with schools can increase multi-agency family support work and learning at home;

- Setting routines and raising expectations early in the school year can improve academic achievement;
- Speaking with parents can help formulate learning targets for pupils.

The primary aim of these kinds of interventions is to provide a platform for communicating with parents and sharing information regarding the school and its pupils. It is important to earn the trust of parents and get buy-in to changes in school policies.

### **Practical Approach 2a- New Intake Programmes/Prospective Students**

An intake programme is intended to engage with *new/prospective students* and their parents/guardians and to provide some useful information with regard to school policies, expectations, requirements, responsibilities of learners, parents, and school, etc. The intake programme can run twice a year. This is an *opportunity to reinforce the no late registration policy* and to meet with prospective learners and families to evaluate their needs and refer them to the appropriate services in the community, if necessary. The intake programme might include:

- General introductory remarks, background about the school, accomplishments, introduction to the teachers and councellors, etc.
- Review of school policies and expectations
- Importance of parental engagements and a review of how parents can access information (i.e., text alerts, emails, meetings, structured conversations, etc.).
- Tour of the school/learning environment

This intake programme is also an opportunity to promote and market the school around its catchment areas and for the school to learn more about the community it serves.

### **Practical Approach 2b- Structured Conversations/Dialogues**

Structured conversations/dialogues can be scheduled once a month and require full participation from parents. The themes of these conversations/dialogues are driven by the concerns of parents/guardians and are facilitated by either the principal or teachers that have experience/training working with parents. These dialogues ensure that the opinions and concerns of parents are taken into account when addressing the learning environment at the school (i.e., policy changes, challenges, etc.). *Structured conversations are a disciplined form of dialogue*, where participants agree to follow a particular framework for facilitation and allow the participants to address shared/complex problems. The aim is to promote parental engagement and generate conversation around one particular problem or challenge. The parents determine the themes and topics of discussion whereas the principal and/or teachers help to coordinate and



facilitate the process. If the school is already doing something similar, you don't have to reinvent the wheel, build on what currently exists and try to institute a more disciplined dialogue around themes or specific issues. Structured conversations are not meant to address many problems in one session. The format is structured and focused, but allow parents to contribute to the dialogue.

## **5.2. Governance and School Policy Reform**

The responsibility for managing South Africa's schools is vested in each school's elected governing body, which by design is dominated by parents, (Fiske and Ladd, 2004). It is the responsibility of the governing body of the school to "take all reasonable measures within its means to supplement the resources supplied by the State" in order to improve the quality of education provided by the schools to all learners at the school,' (Fiske and Ladd, 2004).

The school governing body is an asset and a useful platform to advocate and implement reform. ***The school governing body mustn't be underestimated with regard to its influence and undiminished commitment to the school.*** Schools, particularly those that service disadvantaged communities must deal (creatively) with the practicalities of a board with varying capabilities and education levels.

The literature draws from successful interventions that have leveraged the value of the school governing body. Literature suggests establishing new roles for the school governing body in an effort to get them more involved in setting goals and determining directions; engaging in strategic planning to implement these goals and moving in a specific direction to achieve academic goals.

The following methods were recommended:

### **Method 3-Capacity of the School Governing Body**

Undertake a review of practice in the school governing body to present a profile of 'what success looks like' in terms of the behaviours and relationships between schools and parents to develop useful/valuable engagement strategies for parents and new ways to ensure policy compliance. If there are capability/capacity issues within the school governing body, a review of practice will help to clarify roles and responsibilities, processes of the governing body.

### **Practical Approach 3a- Questions the School Governing Body should ask**

The school governing board has a lot of responsibility and the way it conducts its meetings, who's involved, how it is organized, often determines its effectiveness. In *School Governance Learning from the Best and Schools, Governors and Disadvantage* (both listed in the Toolkits/Best Practice section), challenges faced by school governing bodies are explained in more

detail along with best practice examples. However, one approach to understanding how to build the capacity of the school governing body is to start with a series of questions that would serve as a starting point to help the School Governing Body **understand its roles and responsibilities and importance of their work**. The following questions were adapted from School Governance Learning:

1. How do we understand our roles and responsibilities and how they differ from those of the teachers and senior staff?
2. What do we know about the achievement of pupils and the quality of teaching in the school?
3. How do we know that the information we have about our school is robust and accurate?
4. How do we provide the right balance of professional support and challenge for the teacher and senior staff to help them improve the school's effectiveness?
5. How do we use our time efficiently?
6. How do we make best use of the skills and expertise of all members of the governing body?
7. How do we know that the governing body is as effective as possible and could we do things better?
8. How do we review our own performance regularly?

### **Practical Approach 3b - Promote Policy Reform**

It is important that the school governing body understands the extent of the school's challenges. Therefore the school governing body can appoint a committee/researcher to collect data and study the issue of delayed registration in more detail and make recommendations for a policy change within the school. The committee could motivate the adoption of a policy of on-time registration and ways to enforce a policy that reflects the values, needs and resources of the school.

The school governing body can develop a marketing plan that communicates the school's policy changes, new registration processes and deadlines to all stakeholders, including enrolled students, new and prospective students, school staff and administrators, area high school administrators and relevant community agencies and groups.

What the literature suggests is that there is significant value to be exploited from parental engagement and strengthening the capacity of the school governing board to address challenges within the school.

## 6. RECOMMENDATIONS/CONCLUSIONS

Student achievement is dependent on a number of factors. However, successful schools are able to engage learners and their parents/guardians. Solutions to Bridgetown High School challenges should be backed by sufficient data, supplemented by internal and external research, and best practice and/or toolkits as guidance. The following is recommended:

### 6.1. Data Collection

Literature supports data collection and feedback mechanisms to provide a more complete story and to understand the root causes of the challenges the school faces. Decision-making and interventions should be based on the collection, analysis and reporting of data to all stakeholders. And data must be reliable to make informed decisions.

### 6.2. Toolkits/Best Practice

Toolkits and best practice can be accessed to provide educators, school leadership, and parents with information on current trends and knowledge gained from past experiences of schools addressing similar challenges. Access to relevant toolkits will offer practical advice on improving academic performance, strengthening school policy, financing issues, strategies for parental engagement along with additional resources to access. Relevant toolkits might include:

- *Schools, Governors and Disadvantage*  
<http://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/files/jrf/1994-schools-governors-disadvantage.pdf>
- *School Governance Learning from the Best*  
<http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/surveys-and-good-practice/s/Schools%20-%20Good%20practice%20example.pdf>
- *School Attendance, Good Practice and Procedures*  
<https://www.dorsetforyou.com/media.jsp?mediaid=177010&filetype=pdf>
- *Fifteen Effective Strategies for Improving Student Attendance and Truancy Prevention*  
<https://www.dpi.state.nd.us/title1/progress/present/15ways.pdf>
- *Using Data to Improve Schools*  
[http://aasa.org/uploadedFiles/Policy\\_and\\_Advocacy/files/UsingDataToImproveSchools.pdf](http://aasa.org/uploadedFiles/Policy_and_Advocacy/files/UsingDataToImproveSchools.pdf)
- *Module 1: Policies and Regulation to Promote School Connectivity*  
[http://connectaschool.org/sites/default/files/pdf\\_cache/d74dee95fafb1202737d4476735dd932.pdf](http://connectaschool.org/sites/default/files/pdf_cache/d74dee95fafb1202737d4476735dd932.pdf)
- *Review of best practice in parental engagement*  
[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/182508/DFE-RR156.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/182508/DFE-RR156.pdf)

### **6.3. Additional Research**

Research can provide valuable information about the challenges schools are experiencing. Research can be designed to answer a specific question, which may provide the necessary information needed to create change.

Additional research is necessary to fully understand the impact of delayed social grants on Bridgetown High School. In the meantime, a number of useful toolkits were provided that offer practical advice to school leadership and staff.

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