

Strengthening evidence-based decision-making in education: National Teacher Pedagogy Research Study and the DBE Technical Assistants Project

Introduction

Zenex Foundation is partnering with the National Educational Collaboration Trust (NECT) to implement two critical projects intended to strengthen evidence-based decision-making in the education sector. This includes supporting a national classroom-based research study to deepen understanding of the factors influencing teacher performance. In addition, the partnership provides targeted technical assistance to the DBE to address critical internal capability gaps, enabling more effective policy implementation and programme delivery.

This is a synopsis of the two projects, the National Teacher Pedagogy Research Study (NTPR) Study and the Technical Assistance Project, led by the NECT with support from Zenex and other funders.

1. The National Teacher Pedagogy Research Study

The National Teacher Pedagogy Research Study (NTPR) Study is a longitudinal study that will delve into the complexities of the South African education system. It will provide insight into the issues contributing to poor performance, especially in lower-quintile schools. The study will offer a more nuanced understanding of the factors affecting teachers' work, with the potential to positively influence teacher practices, pedagogical approaches, teaching methodologies and classroom conditions. This, in turn, can contribute to more effective teacher professional development programmes.

It will be conducted in collaboration with 10 universities for which the Teaching, Teacher, and Teacher Education for Equitable and Quality Learning (TTTEQL) Consortium was created. Activities in the study include working on conceptual frameworks, developing instruments, analysing data, managing projects and budgets, and carrying out research at scale.

Zenex's contribution supports capacity-building for emerging Black researchers from disadvantaged universities who will participate in the two-year study (2024–2026). These researchers will shadow lead researchers, receive targeted training, and gain practical experience through fieldwork. The study will strengthen their skills through training, mentorship, and opportunities for visibility, including fieldwork participation, publications, and conference presentations.

Emerging researchers will gain exposure to:

- A large-scale longitudinal study;
- Robust data collection across multiple dimensions of education delivery;
- Research reporting and policy recommendations to inform equitable teaching practices and teacher training;

- Project and budget management;
- Networks for collaboration within the sector.

The overall outcome is a stronger education research infrastructure that supports policy development in the sector.

2. The DBE Technical Assistance Project

The Technical Assistance Project provides targeted support to the Department of Basic Education (DBE) to address internal capability gaps in areas such as data analysis, project writing, financial management and programme troubleshooting. The initiative aims to strengthen the DBE's ability to navigate the complexities of programme implementation.

Based on an assessment of key skill gaps, NECT launched a project to deploy Technical Assistants across DBE branches and programmes, including Business Intelligence, School Nutrition, Language and Literacy, Mother Tongue-Based Bilingual Education, Early Childhood Development, Mathematics and Curriculum strengthening. Zenex's contribution covers strategic planning, consulting fees for Technical Assistants, capacity building for DBE staff, and Monitoring and Evaluation.

Project outputs and outcomes include:

- Deployment of Technical Assistants;
- Policy briefs;
- Training modules;
- Monitoring reports;
- Enhanced internal capacity;
- Improved programme management and support for effective reforms.

Conclusion

Teacher professional development has been a longstanding area of focus for Zenex. The NTPR Study will deepen understanding of the interrelated factors impacting teachers' work, in turn, it can contribute to more effective professional development programmes for teacher trainees. The Technical Assistants Project aligns with Zenex's commitment to building greater DBE capacity in providing good quality education.