

By Lameez Omarjee

# Capturing growth in SA's schools

The Data-Driven Districts (DDD) dashboard is aimed at guiding education officials in designing and implementing interventions to improve educational outcomes of all learners across the country.

The DDD dashboard is the result of research started in 2012 by the DDD project. The user-friendly dashboard makes data from over 2m South African learners available to education officials. By allowing officials to view learner and school performance effectively, this data platform will assist them in improving the support that is provided to both students and their teachers within the school system.

"Data is key for any organisation to make decisions," says Giles Gillett, founder and managing director at non-profit organisation New Leaders Foundation (NLF), which oversees DDD. Gillett explains how DDD research revealed that although data was available in the education system, no suitable format existed to visualise the data and take relevant action.

International funders partnered with the department of basic education (DBE), the private sector and NGOs to develop a solution. As a result, the DDD dashboard was created to present data in a standardised format, making it accessible to key stakeholders and aid further decision-making based on analysis and facts.

The dashboard was first piloted in 2013, and has since been expanded through projects in Gauteng, Limpopo, the Free State and Mpumalanga, according to Gillett.

The dashboard has helped facilitate data collection and capturing for 4 000 schools over the past three years. Dashboard metrics are extracted directly from the South Africa Schools Administration Management System (SA-SAMS), and reflect key performance outcomes such as attendance of learners, quarterly test marks, curriculum coverage and progression as well as matric pass rates. All measures are benchmarked against targets set by the DBE.

Data can be analysed in detail, comparing performance across provinces, districts, circuits, clusters, schools, phases (foundation, intermediate and FET) and grades. Users are able to conduct trend analyses and reports are also made available on the dashboard, says Gillett.

"We have created a tool for government to access information on their schools at the push of a button," he adds.

## How does it work?

Schools capture their data on SA-SAMS, which is distributed free of charge by the DBE. Once the information is uploaded to SA-SAMS, it is available for transfer to the province's data warehouses and to the web-enabled DDD dashboard. Data access is strictly controlled and users are only authorised to view data in their geographic area of responsibility.

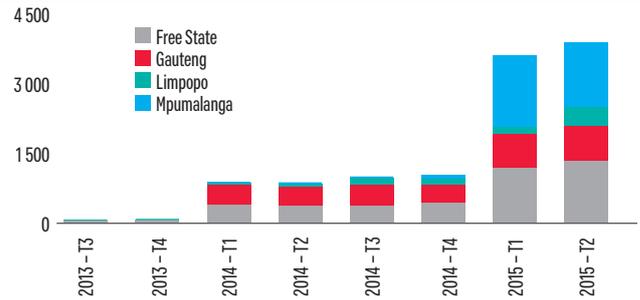
"We are still overcoming data challenges," says Gillett. "Not all schools use SA-SAMS, and in some areas, internet connectivity is not available." The project team works with schools in the active provinces to build

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**Giles Gillett**  
Founder and managing director at New Leaders Foundation (NLF)

**GRAPH 1: UPTAKE IN THE NUMBER OF SCHOOLS USING THE DDD DASHBOARD**



**GRAPH 2: THE NUMBER OF LEARNERS REPRESENTED ON THE DDD DASHBOARD**



\*T = Term  
SOURCE: New Leaders Foundation

their capacity to capture and submit data to the required completeness and quality standards. The dashboard usage process requires onsite coaching and support as it also involves basic computer literacy training for users, data submission and dashboard navigation.

The dashboard has been implemented in four provinces but the plan is to extend it nationally over the next three years. Implementation depends on the readiness of schools and their SA-SAMS usage, says Gillett.

Training is facilitated by graduates working fulltime in districts, as part of a two-year professional development programme with NLF. "Apart from improving education, the project is also creating employment in the sector," says Gillett.

The practical application of information and decision making is carried out by district officials, school principals and their management teams. **Learner outcomes occur in the classroom, says Gillett, and the sustainability of the project stems from the providing of vital information – visualised in the most useful format – to the people who are best placed to bring about the changes required.**

Currently NLF's goal is to support government in getting more schools to use the dashboard and make the project sustainable to improve learner outcomes, says Gillett. ■  
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