



REAL PEOPLE DOING UNREAL THINGS

# Leading with the head

**David Wylde**  
Retired principal

**When David Wylde retired as principal** of St Andrew's College in Grahamstown, he swapped the vast headmaster's house for three rondavels in Mpumalanga — which he shares with a boomslang, a spitting cobra and a black mamba.

Wylde is now based near Nelspruit, where he initiated the Principal to Principal (PTP) initiative for Penreach, an outreach project of Penryn College.

The origins of both programmes run back two decades to when Wylde started as headmaster of St Stithians College in Johannesburg in 1989, and was looking for the right initiative for the school to support. School leaders, in consultation with community leaders, decided to start an independent school in Mpumalanga that would be a beacon of hope for rural schools. The Penryn Trust was set up and Penryn College and Penreach were the result.

"It was on this platform that we started to talk to principals in rural and township schools. The outreach was aimed at teachers, in order to reach the biggest number of people. Frankly, however, whatever intervention we could come up with was doomed without the principals' backing and support," says Wylde.

He now spends his time communicating with, coaching and mentoring 10 principals of Mpumalanga schools (five primary schools and the five secondary schools they feed into).

"The idea is to improve the principals' leadership skills and leadership consciousness. I'm looking through the eyes of the principal at the needs of the school and coming up with strategies to satisfy those needs," says Wylde.

The programme is not prescriptive. Rather, Wylde discusses the schools' various needs with the teachers and principals before suggesting strategies.

He recommends creating a house structure within schools, which creates vertical divisions, and then breaking these further into tutor groups. A house system costs nothing but it gives people a sense of belonging. He



also suggests motivational workshops for teachers, and leadership camps with grade 11 pupils.

Starting every day with a registration class is also integral to the system. It forces teachers and pupils to arrive on time and makes them accountable if they do not. "A principal told me how a teacher had approached him to ask permission to go to a student's house. The student hadn't been to class in three weeks and the teacher was concerned. In 15 years as principal this was the first time a teacher had ever asked him that," says Wylde.

"We're turning unmotivated individual educators into people who are really fired up and enjoying their jobs again."

The plan is to grow the programme by engaging retired school heads throughout the country, providing struggling schools with access to the huge network and wealth of experience that these individuals represent.

"I set off to change the world, but I've learnt it is far more complicated than I expected. The schools lack all the fundamentals," says Wylde. "So now I'm less inclined to believing in a single solution, and more trying to make the right choices week by week, month by month.

"You can't get children to concentrate if they are not fed. The biggest challenge is the lack of food and water. We're trying to institute a culture of care in the schools."

**Kate Thompson**

## THE UNREALITY CHECK

- Mentoring rural and township principals
- Promoting a house structure in schools
- Working towards establishing a network of principal-mentors