

## The Effect of the Relationship between Principals and School Governing Bodies on Grade 12 Learner Performance

Hendri Theron<sup>a</sup>

a. Department of Curriculum Studies and Higher Education, University of the Free State, South Africa.


Email: [theronjhrk@ufs.ac.za](mailto:theronjhrk@ufs.ac.za)

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### ABSTRACT

This case study explores the effect of the relationship between the principal of a secondary school within a poor community and the school governing body (SGB) on Grade 12 learner performance. The paper challenges the negative stereotype of the relationship between school principals and SGBs in lower-quintile schools. Much of the literature reports on allegations by principals that SGBs do not contribute to the improvement of schools; rather, they interfere negatively with the management thereof. This paper is couched in the collegial model. Using a single case study, the findings are based on qualitative data collected during interviews conducted with the principal and the chair of the SGB as well as observations in the classrooms and on the school grounds. The study found that there was a good relationship between the principal and the SGB chair. The paper concludes that a harmonious relationship between the principal and the SGB allows the SGB to support the school, resulting in enhanced Grade 12 academic performance in mathematics. A harmonious relationship between the principal and SGB forms the foundation for the academic performance of learners, as the majority of the SGB is represented by parents of the school. The data collected during the research study suggests that the greater school community must ensure that the chair of the SGB and the school principal have a good relationship and that the SGB is supportive of the school in advancing its educational activities.

### KEYWORDS

School governing bodies (SGB); principal; relationships; support; learner performance; Quintile 1.

## INTRODUCTION

Globally and locally, schools are governed by school governing bodies (SGB). Around the world, SGBs play an integral part in securing governance arrangements to ensure the proper conduct of the school and the accreditation of international schools (James & Sheppard, 2013). Locally, the South African Schools Act (SASA) of 1996 introduced SGBs into all public schools as part of school management and governance (Basson & Mestry, 2019). In South Africa, SGBs are made up of parents of learners, learners themselves, educators at the school, and members of the community in which the school is located. The SGB in each school is responsible for the everyday management and governance of the school. The SGB must decide on and carry out school policies appropriate for that school. Having fair policies regarding admissions to and exclusions from schools helps protect children's rights to education (Mansfield-Barry & Stwayi, 2017).

A recent study by Kruger et al. (2022) reported that the principal of the school acts in three different capacities, namely conducting the management of the school, and interacting with the Department of Education (DoE) and the school community. With these three positions, the principal must lead and manage the school, report to the DoE (the employer), and report to the wider community, which includes parents/guardians and alumni (Kruger et al., 2022). As the parents/guardians active in the SGB also have full-time jobs, not all SGB members have an educational background or knowledge of educational matters. The lack of an understanding of how the educational system functions and the responsibilities and limitations of their role can negatively affect the school's functioning (Basson & Mestry, 2019). Clear allocations in terms of responsibilities are not always understood and the SGB can negatively interfere with the responsibilities of the principal (Basson & Mestry, 2019; Hartell et al. 2016; Heystek, 2004).

Heystek (2004) found that many principals choose to do the work themselves rather than seek the assistance of members of the SGB, as the board members often do not have the required skills to assist in educational and/or financial matters. Mahlangu (2005) and later Hartell et al. (2016) and also Kruger et al. (2022) found that both the principals and the SGBs view trust between the principal and the SGB, decision-making between management and governance, and accountability for specific work to be done to be the main factors that cause conflict between SGBs and principals.

Hartell et al. (2016) also investigated principals' perceptions and experiences of parents' roles in SGBs in rural areas. They found that principals struggle with parents' lack of knowledge regarding education and school matters, and they do not participate actively in meetings. Basson and Mestry (2019) stated that, in many schools, collaboration between the principal and the SGB was ineffective, and that more structures were needed to manage and govern a school effectively, especially in regard to financial management.

However, in contrast to the conclusions drawn in the literature cited above, there are also schools where the principal and the SGB have a very good relationship. The objective of this paper is therefore:

1. To present the view of cooperation between the school principal, SGB chair, and the full SGB in school management and governance, and
2. To determine the effect this positive relationship has on learner performance, especially academics.

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework for this study is couched in the collegial model of collaboration. The collegial model states that, through discussion, the organisation determines policies and makes decisions. According to Coleman and Anderson (2000), the collegial model supports the principle of participatory governance and therefore encourages collaboration among those undertaking various roles. Mestry and Govindasamy (2013) mention that collaboration can also be regarded as the ability of school management teams (SMT) and SGBs to work together on the basis of trust, understanding, and common goals. This framework is relevant to this study, as the collaboration between the school principal and the SGB chair assisted in improved Grade 12 learner performances.

### METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research approach made use of a case study design, a research approach in which one or a few instances of a phenomenon are studied (Given, 2008). Purposive sampling was applied to the selected schools and participants: they were selected according to the criteria most related to the problem under investigation (Maree, 2007). The case for this study was the teaching and learning environment of a Quintile 1 secondary school<sup>1</sup> in the Fezile Dabi district in the Free State province.

#### Table 1.

*Number of Grade 12 Learners Versus the Number Who Achieved a Passing Mark at the Participating School in Mathematics from 2016 to 2020*

	Grade 12 Mathematics Pass Rates				
	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
No. of learners	38	32	37	22	25
No. of learners who passed	19	27	34	17	22
Pass rate (%)	50	85	92	77	88

Table 1 illustrates the performance in Grade 12 in mathematics, used as an indicator for the selection of the participating school. The sample comprised the principal, also the Grade 12 mathematics teacher at the school, and the chair of the SGB, a local police officer. The principal was appointed in 2015 and has been teaching at the school for the last 30 years. The SGB chair has been on the SGB since 2015 and has chaired the SGB for the last three years.

<sup>1</sup> A Quintile 1 school is highly dependent on the DoE for financial and human resource support, along with resources for effective teaching and learning.

## Interviews

The data was collected through semi-structured interviews and observations. The principal was interviewed online via Microsoft Teams before a visit was made to the school. The chair of the SGB was interviewed at his place of work after the visit to the school. The interview began with one question from the interviewer, which led to the development of the interview, based on the answers given by each participant. The initial open-ended question posed to the participants was:

Please tell me what factors have contributed to the good performance in mathematics at your school.

## Observations

Observations also formed part of the data collection process. An observation matrix was compiled to record and analyse the observations made during the visit to the participating school. The school was observed holistically, both inside and around the school, to note the effect that the school's physical environment might have on the relationship between the principal and SGB. Table 2 represents a summary of the observations recorded.

### Table 2.

*Observation Matrix (see Appendix)*

The establishment of sequential order in the research design, wherein the interview with the principal was administered before the observations of the school grounds, yielded associations between the interview outcomes and the subsequent observational findings. The interview with the SGB chair was conducted after the observations, so the researchers could refer to their observations during that interview. Consequently, some of the findings recorded in the observation matrix correlate to the analysis of the interviews. The correlations between the interviews and observations assisted the researchers in understanding the effect that the harmonious relationship between the principal and the SGB had on Grade 12 academic performance in the participating school.

## Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to evaluate the narratives. Transcribing the narratives after the initial interviews allowed me to familiarise myself with the data for the second time. This allowed me to form a better and deeper understanding of the data collected. The thematic analysis process involved analysing and identifying applicable themes. The transcribed interviews were categorised and coded into different subthemes. The analysis of the interviews provided an understanding of how the relationship between the principal and the SGB chair positively affects learners' academic performance. The observation matrix was drawn up to record and analyse the observations made during the visit to the participating school. The analysis of the interview with the principal formed the foundation of the structure of the observation matrix (see Table 2).

### **Data Verification**

The creditability and transferability of the study was established to ensure its trustworthiness. In this study, all the participants gave consent and knew what was expected of them. To ensure the credibility of the study, the researcher strove to adhere to the above norms. According to Steyn (2004), transferability is determined by establishing whether the findings of the study are applicable in a different context or environment, or for other groups. However, it is essential to note that it is the responsibility of the reader to use the results and apply them in practice (Moodley, 2014). Due to the qualitative nature of the study, findings cannot necessarily be generalised. The results are transferable and may be of value to DoE, high schools, and teachers in Further Education and Training schools to integrate and improve Grade 12 academic performance.

Ethical clearance was obtained from the General Human Research Ethics Committee at the University of the Free State, as well as consent from the Free State Department of Education (FSDoE).

### **PRESENTATION OF DATA**

After the transcription of the interviews and the observations recorded in the observation matrix, the following subthemes were identified from the data collected, discussed below.

#### **The Notion of Trust, and a Strong Bond Between the Principal and the SGB Chair**

Basson and Mestry (2019), Hartell et al. (2016), and Heystek (2006) posit that the establishment of mutual trust between the principal and the SGB plays a pivotal role in facilitating effective management and governance within an educational institution. In this case study, the principal and the chair of the SGB had a good working relationship and friendship over an extended period. They had known each other from their school days, as the SGB chair mentioned in his interview: “I know him, we’ve schooled together”. Apart from their friendship, they also respected each other in the workplace, as is shown by the fact that the SGB chair praised the leadership of the principal and alluded to the trust between them:

*But his leadership is very good, and he is not a biased person. He is a person who is doing what he says. He stands on his word. He is a resilient person in what he knows.*

The SGB chair also stated that the principal was the reason that the school is doing so well: “And I can assure you, since he became principal then the school change[d] totally ... now there is order”. Based on the observations at the school it was clear that good leadership by the principal was evident to see (see Table 2, 1.2).

The discussions that followed during the interviews confirmed the notion of trust and a strong bond between the principal and the SGB chair. Although the interviews with the principal and the chair were conducted separately, there were many areas of commonality in the collected data between the two interviews, as be discussed below. The support from the SGB was evident and welcomed by the principal. This notion of trust formed the foundation for the rest of the SGB to be supportive of the school in various ways.

### **SGB Support of the School**

According to Basson & Mestry (2019), the augmentation of a school's functionality can be achieved through the reinforcement of collaboration between the educational institution and the SGB. In the interview with the school's principal, he stated very clearly that the whole SGB was very supportive of the school. "Yes, they (SGB) are highly supportive ... teaching and learning support also, yes, we are getting the right support." The chair of SGB agreed with the principal regarding the support the SGB gave the school, teachers, and the FSDoE. "What I can say is this. We are very supportive. Through our learners, however, we support all the programs that the department is involved with."

A component of the support provided by the SGB to enhance the functionality of the school, especially for the Grade 12 learners, is that the SGB provides an additional meal for them after school. As the principal stated, "Then they [the learners] get tea and bread provided by the SGB".

The chair of SGB also mentioned the support through the meal after school:

*The SGB supports them with the meals so that they can get the meals because you cannot study without eating, so we make sure that we allocate money for their meals ... We provide for the Grade 12 learners so that we can have that stability.*

The effect of the meal after school is summarised by the following vignette described by the SGB chair:

*One of the children informed the principal that he couldn't study at home. He lived with his siblings, maybe seven, in the same shack, but there was only one light. And if the father says 'no, I can't sleep that light is disruptive', he's supposed to switch it off and supposed to sleep. But we made a plan that all the learners must come after school, and they don't go home. They can stay here until, say, 18h00.*

The meal the SGB provides has many benefits for the learners. The Grade 12 learners can now attend to their academic work, as they are well-fed. They can work on their academic work between 14h00 and 18h00, when they go home.

The observations confirmed that the kitchen on the school grounds was very good and well-equipped (see Table 2, 3.1). The kitchen staff were functional and prepared food for the whole school at 10h00 and then the tea and bread for the Grade 12 students after school.

The SGB is also very supportive of creating a space and environment conducive to teaching and learning. The SGB ensured that the basic needs, nutrition, and safety of the learners and teachers were met. The chair explained the following:

*They must take care of their classrooms... we cannot allow everywhere breaking, windows and doors ... We involve the municipality so that they involve the public works, so that we can get that problem because of the ablutions from the school... We have a borehole; we have a dam. Everything is fine ... We have ladies who are cleaning the bathrooms ... cleaning the corridors ...*

The observations (see Table 2, 2.1 and 2.2) correlated with the views of the SGB chair, in that the classrooms were well maintained. The space and visual environments inside the classroom were conducive to teaching and learning.

Apart from meeting basic needs, the SGB went further and provided laptops to assist with teaching and learning: “Last year we bought the teachers laptops ... this enables the educators to assist the learners who have smartphones to get information”.

As a Quintile 1 school where funds are limited, the SGB assisted the school in creating a safe and conducive environment in and around the school. This reflects the good financial stability and governance at the school that is created by the SGB.

### **Financial Stability and Governance**

Basson & Mestry (2019) stated that financial governance is one of the primary duties of an SGB, but lack of mutual trust between the principal and the SGB in many schools influences financial governance negatively, as either the principal does not trust the financial knowledge of the SGB or the SGB does not trust the way the principal wants to use the school’s finances. However, with mutual trust and support between the principal and the SGB (see 4.1), financial stability and governance (see 4.2) were evident. The chair of the SGB indicated that the SGB had different stakeholders in the school who assisted with financial governance: “We have different stakeholders in the school...”.

A creative and entrepreneurial approach in an SGB can assist the most financially deprived schools become better centers for educating the South African youth. This emerged as one of the characteristics of the SGB that formed part of this case study. The successful governance of the school is well illustrated by the following example, as explained by the SGB chair:

*The SGB consulted with a cell phone company to erect a cell phone tower on the school premises. Once consent had been granted, the cell phone company paid a lump sum to the school for the use of the school property, followed by a monthly rental amount. The school bought a vehicle with the funds that make it easier for staff members to get to venues for school-related events, such as workshops, meetings, or conferences. The monthly rental income helps the school meet its other financial obligations.*

The building of a cell phone tower on the school premises is an example of the creative and entrepreneurial approach that the SGB has taken in generating funds for the school. These activities have been fully supported by the principal; they have been beneficial to teaching and learning activities. Financial stability, created by the SGB, allows the school to compensate the teachers who work after school, on weekends, and during holidays, as the SGB chair explained:

*With this initiative, the teachers will also be involved. The SGB compensates the teachers who are involved, but just the teachers who helped. There is an incentive for them.*

Some of the funds generated were used to support the learners’ academic performance, especially at the Grade 12 level, with the extra-academic program.

The SGB doesn't only provide financial stability, it also takes the initiative to raise money for the school for the learners to benefit from. The SGB chair was very excited about this initiative:

*Last year and the year before last year ... we raised funds to buy tickets, but we're planning a trip to Durban where they can go and see different things ... this initiative is from the SGB.*

The mutually beneficial rapport between the school principal and the SGB engenders a cascading impact on the optimal operation of the educational institution. The SGB chair is aware of the extra-academic program at the school and is proud of how the school prepares the Grade 12 students for exams:

*They are also coming on weekends ... We are also supplying them with meals and for the matrix and we also have a program for the exams. So actually, now we are going to prepare them for the final.*

The principal supported the views of the SGB and indicated the importance of the extra-academic program for Grade 12 on the academic performance of the school.

*The Grade 12 learners are here every day all the time ... Then from 3 pm until 6 pm, learners should engage in supervised self-study ... educators will only be there to ensure that learners are studying and they're not doing anything else, therefore, we said, let us give them up to four hours of self-study at school. That is why we came up with the 7am to 7:45am and the 3pm to 6pm arrangement. So, in those cases where learners are finding it very difficult to work from home, at least they might have some time at school to do homework. We always teach during holidays...*

The principal also stated that during the June and September holidays, the Grade 12 learners remain at the school to prepare for the National Senior Certificate (NCS) Examination: *We always teach during holidays. Whenever there are holidays, we teach. If it is two weeks, then we take one week of teaching and then one week off. If we have three weeks, we'll be teaching for two weeks and then have one week off ... You know schools are closed on Wednesday, but then we decided as a school to stay. Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday, and Monday, we'll be at school.*

The data collected from the interviews between the principal and the SGB showed the harmonious relationship between the two parties and the effect that has on the school. The notion of trust between the principal and the SGB chair, SGB support for the school, financial stability and governance, and the extra-academic program for the Grade 12 learners in the school was recognised as subthemes that affect the academic performance of the Grade 12 students.

### **DISCUSSION OF DATA**

The data discussed above presents the thematic analysis of the data collected through the interviews and observations with the subthemes identified. In the discussion below, findings are



presented of the effect the relationship between the principal and the SGB chair had on the school. Contributions are acknowledged and conclusions are drawn from the findings obtained from the interviews and observations.

The collected data and information confirmed a harmonious relationship between the principal, the SGB chair, and members of the SGB. This relationship has a positive effect on the management and governance of the school, allowing learners to perform well academically. The factors following from the data collected can be regarded as factors that proceed from the harmonious relationship that contributes to academic performance.

### **Conducive Teaching and Learning Environment**

Kapur (2018) noted that a positive learning environment will set the tone for effective and sufficient teaching and learning processes and that a conducive classroom environment will contribute to the well-organised and efficient management of lesson presentations, instructional strategies, and overall teaching and learning processes. The study by Ogbonnaya and Awuah (2019) found that a stable structured learning environment means the difference in achievement between a Quintile 4 school and Quintiles 1, 2, and 3 schools. One of the benefits of the harmonious relationship between the SGB and the principal at this Quintile 1 school is that a teaching and learning environment had been created that was conducive to and promoted academic performance.

### **Safe Environment**

As the discussion above indicated, a school must create a safe environment for its learners. The participating school and its SGB went out of their way to make the environment in and around the school as safe and conducive for teaching and learning as possible (see Table 2, 1.1). There was clean running water from the borehole, the school was well maintained to make sure it was safe for the learners and staff, allowing students to concentrate on academic performance (see Table 2, 1.1, 2.1 & 2.2). The school had a good relationship with the local community and municipality, ensuring that there were no hazards to harm the learners and staff (see Table 2, 1.1).

### **Resources**

The effectiveness of a school is measured by how well its resources are used to produce the maximum results (Delvin et al., 2012; Kapur, 2018). Kapur (2018) also states that the availability of teaching and learning resources enhances the effectiveness of a school's academic performance. The participating school's financial stability (see 3.3), created by the harmonious relationship between the principal and the SGB, assisted the school with teaching and learning resources. The school had sufficient classrooms to teach in and desks for the learners to sit and work at (see Table 2, 2.2).

Apart from basic resources, such as textbooks and notes, the school also provides extra resources for the teachers' use (see Table 2, 2.3). The support (see 4.2) and financial governance (see 4.3) have assisted the school in buying laptops and projectors for the teachers to use in their classrooms to enhance teaching and learning.

Apart from the technological resources, two computer laboratories and a mathematics laboratory for the learners' use enhance their academic performance. In the mathematics laboratory, there is also an interactive whiteboard connected to the classroom computer (see Table 2, 2.3). The SGB assisted in establishing these laboratories.

White & Van Dyk (2019) mentioned that Quintile's rankings of schools affect facilities that are important for teaching and learning. They indicate that Quintile 1 schools have very limited school resources, which has a detrimental effect on the learning and teaching in these schools. Although this was a Quintile 1 school, the principal and the SGB, working together, made sure there were facilities and resources conducive to teaching and learning.

### **Additional Teaching and Learning Time**

The academic program at the school was not restricted to school hours. Academic results are the school's main priority, as the learners, especially by the Grade 12 level, and their teachers spend most of each day, even during the holidays, at the school. The SGB support (see 4.2), financial governance by the SGB (see 4.3), and the adequate feeding program for the students (see 4.2) make it possible for the learners to spend more, and more productive, time at school. The SGB aims to provide an additional meal (see 3.2) for Grade 12 learners to motivate them to remain at school after normal school hours and use the time productively for studying. The teaching time after school gives the Grade 12 students, especially those who cannot study at home (see vignette in 3.2), the time to finish their schoolwork under the supervision of teachers.

The school also provides teaching time during holidays for the learners to prepare for upcoming exams, especially the September holiday in preparation for the Grade 12 final NSC examination. As the SGB compensates the teachers who assist the Grade 12 learners and, there is always supervision to assist them with their schoolwork. Furthermore, with the incentive the teachers receive from the SGB, they are also more willing to give up their time to teach after school and during holidays.

Additional teaching time is common in schools. However, the organisational structure in which this school conducts the additional teaching time is unique in that it is done in conjunction with the SGB.

### **Adequate Nutrition for the Learners**

The harmonious relationship between the principal and the SGB plays an important role in how the school provides meals to the Grade 12 learners after school. The SGB fully supports the school, which is part of the NSNP funded by the DoE (see 3.2). To provide the meals, the SGB and the school must make sure that the program operates well. The SGB and the principal are the main parties in the NSNP project, meaning that collaboration between the two is important (Mawela & Van den Berg, 2020). The funds and stock must be taken care of for the program to be sustainable throughout the year. The kitchen and the kitchen staff must manage to prepare the food every day. These meals assist the learners in functioning optimally from 7h00 to 18h00. During the September holiday, the learners sleep and eat at the school in preparation for the

final NCS examinations. The SGB also assists with the provision of food for the learners. For many Grade 12 students, the two daily school meals are the only ones they receive.

The provision of meals by the NSNP is a common feature in most Quintile 1 schools. In this case study, the positive relationship between the principal and the SGB allows the SGB to use good financial governance to provide an extra meal for the Grade 12 learners after school.

### **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This case study contradicts other literature on the disharmonious relationship between the school principal, the SGB chair, and the broader SGB in Quintile 1 schools. A strong and trustworthy relationship between the principal and the SGB chair has paved the way for a harmonious relationship between the SGB and the school. The effect of this relationship is a school that is situated in a safe environment conducive to teaching and learning. Apart from the positive environment, the SGB assists in providing opportunities for Grade 12 learners to attend to their academic work outside the normal school hours, with additional nutrition and supervision.

These findings can be regarded as common sense. However, the findings are not common features in Quintile 1 schools, as other literature has stated. The good relationship between the principal and the SGB chair has led to a good relationship between the school and the SGB. These good relationships have assisted the school's good financial governance, which has allowed factors that enhance the academic performance of Grade 12 students, especially in mathematics. Ultimately, learners at a Quintile 1 school and their academic performance are the greatest beneficiaries of this harmonious relationship.

However, the limitation of the current study to a single case study means that it cannot be generalised for all Quintile 1 schools: schools are complex institutions. In light of the above limitations, this study recommends further research, and that the participating schools and stakeholders are broadened. Further research will ensure ways and methods to improve the academic performance of Grade 12 learners can be found, especially in communities with fewer resources. Further research will provide more insights and findings for stakeholders in the DoE, the school community, and the schools to find ways that enhance learner performance, especially at the Grade 12 level.

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## APPENDIX

**Table 2.**

*Observation Matrix*

1. School		
1.1	Buildings and facilities	The facilities and buildings are those of a school with little financial support, although teaching and learning take place in a safe environment. All buildings are maintained and in fair condition. All the classes are big enough, have enough desks and chairs, and a blackboard to write on. The school grounds are fenced around the perimeter. There are two computer labs and one mathematics lab.
1.2	Leadership	The headmaster of the school was visible most of the time. He was present in the venue where the Grade 12s wrote their exam and handed out the papers to the learners. After he handed out the papers for the Grade 12s, he walked around the school to observe whether the assessments of other grades were running smoothly. The general impression was that order and functionality prevailed.
2. Classrooms		
2.1	Space	There is enough space for all the learners in each class. The desks are arranged in such a way that group work is promoted. The learners can be seated at work stations arranged in groups of three (This observation was made in the mathematics lab. There is also sufficient space in the other classrooms.)
2.2	Visual environment	The visual environment in the class enhances teaching and learning. There are posters on the walls, identifying it as the mathematics classroom. The visual environment of the other classes is also up to standard, contributing to a positive learning environment.
2.3	Resources	The mathematics laboratory has an interactive whiteboard that is connected to a computer. Apart from the computer labs, the mathematics

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laboratory is the only other class with a computer. The other classrooms are well-equipped with desks, chairs, a blackboard and textbooks. These textbooks/notes are provided by the school for the learners' use. At the end of the year, the learners return the materials to the school. If the books are too expensive to buy, the school copies the textbook and/or notes for the learners.

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**3. Facilities**

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- 3.1 Kitchen There is a well-equipped kitchen where meals are prepared for all the learners during break time and after school (the latter for Grade 12 learners only). The school is part of the National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP). All the learners receive one meal per day at the school, funded by the DoE. The Grade 12 learners receive two meals, with the second meal being funded by the SGB.
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