

Improved literacy supports learner performance

Massmart's corporate social investment approach provides an integrated programme supporting specific inter-related areas of social need.

Primary school nutrition support is a key pillar of our holistic approach to ensuring future generations graduate from the education system with a meaningful education that assists in building and strengthening the social and economic fabric of our country. Equally, supporting the national Department of Education's core literacy programme, Foundations for Learning, provides us with an opportunity to assist in improving the quantity, and quality, of reading and learning that takes place in classrooms. The language of instruction transition in Grade 4, from mother tongue to English, has been identified as an area of particular challenge and this, together with nutrition, is where our focus lies.



Developing a functional education system has been challenging for our country. Despite the best efforts of the Department of Education to provide sound curricula and accessible foundation phase mother tongue instruction we still face the harsh reality of ill-equipped and under-skilled learners entering the job market each year. Recent research indicates that approximately 60 to 80% of our schools are essentially dysfunctional. At Massmart we firmly believe that a lack of English literacy is a root cause of this problem and have structured our response to meet the challenge.

Understanding the issues

To ensure we fully understood the issue we brought in an expert to guide us in comprehending the scope of the problem, and assist us in developing a targeted, impactful literacy support programme that would make a tangible difference. The outcome confirmed our thinking; that English literacy is a critical foundational requirement for future learning. Without the ability to read, write, comprehend and reason in English learning becomes almost impossible in any other subject.

Currently learners are taught in their mother tongue for the first three years and then move to English in Grade 4. Unfortunately this can create a situation where children must first overcome the language difficulty before they can begin to understand what they are being taught. In effect the language of instruction becomes a barrier to learning and if this is not addressed in the primary school phase the essential building blocks of learning are never achieved.

Massmart's response has been to develop a consolidated CSI strategy that combines the benefits of our hygiene and nutrition projects with a programme that addresses weak educational foundations. Through our support programmes we are building the English language competency of primary school learners while simultaneously supporting healthy, nourished bodies that ultimately enable healthy, nourished minds.

Retailer or educator?

Massmart has recognised that the private sector has a role to play in assisting government's efforts in respect of growth targets, skills development and job creation. Education delivery falls to government, but as a large corporate citizen which provides goods and services to, and employs people who emerge from the education system, the challenges become part of our strategic focus as well.

By offering support to the Foundations for Learning initiative through a programme that improves the delivery of core English literacy education in the classroom we achieve a number of mutual goals. These include a well-educated and skilled pool of future employees for our company, alignment to national policy priorities and an enhanced relationship with government. Fundamentally it makes sense to contribute toward future generations who are literate, who can progress to further education and training and, ultimately, a place in the mainstream economy.

We have realised that to do this effectively and impactfully we need to partner with organisations

which have experience in the field. We have had engagements with the Department of Education to ensure we are fully aligned with the curriculum for 2011 and into the future, including changes to the previous curriculum statement and the recently released Action Plan 2014: Towards the Realisation of Schooling 2025. On a practical level we have had preliminary meetings with delivery partners, including READ, whose teaching methodologies, training and resources provide the national footprint we require to implement our literacy programme. As we are still in the initial phase we have yet to enter into any formal delivery partnerships, and have used this time to ensure that we identify partners whose methodologies and systems complement the status quo. We intend to help, not hurt, an already challenging situation.

Building on our own foundations

Massmart companies have already made inroads in CSI education support. Massdiscounters, Masscash and Makro have a spectrum of programmes ranging from vouchers for workbook photocopy paper and support materials to the provision of technology into schools at all levels. Our literacy programme intends to build on these, focusing on the intermediate phase, by offering a balanced language programme that helps teachers deliver the curriculum more effectively and provides the resources, training and materials for them to do so.

Bringing it all together: A holistic intervention

As one of South Africa's largest retailers, Massmart is aware of the benefits of getting a formula right and replicating a successful model nationally – rolling out stores successfully depends on this. The same approach will be adopted in the implementation of our literacy programme in order to build-in cost efficiencies and ensure social benefit, but also to achieve our goal of creating future generations of literate, nourished individuals who can take up their rightful place in the mainstream economy. ■

