

# AN EDUCATOR'S NETWORK

*RL Mthembu*

- Educator's Network?
- Could this be the way to support and strengthen history?
- A discussion document

## **Introduction**

We have been talking about starting History educator's network but we have never actually sat down to discuss why networks might be a good idea or worked out what they should look like. These are some ideas to kick start the debate.

This paper consists of a collection of ideas from various US sources and is intended to throw around ideas so that we can discard, modify or use whatever other people have done in establishing educator networks.

## **Why Educator's Network?**

Educator's networks have been in existence in a number of countries for a number of years, but in South-Africa they have been a household name as they are in countries such as the US for example.

There are no clear figures on how many educator networks exist, but they certainly number in the hundreds. Some employ full-time staff. Many hold annual meetings, publish newsletters and journals, and produce research on best practices.

Many trace the rise of networks to educator's near-universal distaste for conventional training model based on the one-shot workshops offered by government officials and consultants. There is a general feeling among educators that the experts tell educators how to teach and then leave them to fend for themselves. This results in an educator's attitude that pointedly say "if you aren't going to give us practical learning experiences, we'll do it to ourselves" (Richardson, 1996:2).

With the number of educators joining networks increasing, the movement has caught the attention of scholars and policy-makers who are searching for rich and productive ways to give practicing educators in-depth learning experiences.

### **What are Educator's Network?**

Educator's network come in all shapes and sizes. Some are national in scope, while others cover only one district or province. Some focus on a specific subject, teaching methods and approaches, or are organized around a theme that attract educators with similar interest, or approaches to reform that give members a common purpose. Some link educators, school administrators, parents, and community members.

What has been observed to be common in most networks is the rejection of the traditional one-size-fits-all approach to educator learning. Therefore, many offer a rich mixture of educational opportunities conceived and run by educators for educators.

### **Why should we have History Educator's Networks?**

The most important reason for having networks is that networks offer educators support and a place to learn about innovative teaching methods and materials . Network educators are put in close touch with the latest thinking, classroom approaches, and instructional materials that can help them bring their practices more directly in line with government goals.

Government supported networks connect educators with a variety of resources so that educators can stay up to date on changes in government policy and procedures.

Most networks in the US hold summer/spring/winter schools providing educators with expertise, allowing them to pool their knowledge and build new ideas about their craft together. Networks also encourage educators to try out new ideas, air complaint or talk about the successes and struggles of other teachers.

At the same time, networks have to take care not to criticize office-baed officials for the way they are doing their work. Network leaders

have to point out that educators have no intention of taking anyone's job or of telling them how to do it!

The aim of educator networks is to form partnerships in order to move forward together. Networks encourage educators to take ideas from network programmes, try them out, then return to reflect, and fine-tune them. One of the most effective uses of the networks is that network members provide follow-ups to educators at schools and ongoing support during the school year.

Ongoing support keeps educators informed about new ideas and encourages them to keep developing their craft. This continuity has been singled out by many educators as what they like about educator networks unlike the one-shot in-service training that is usually provided by the government officials.

According to educators, discussing and trying out classroom-tested practices is highly rewarding and more useful than being talked at by subject matter experts or methodology specialists.

Networks also provide leadership opportunities for educators both within and outside the networks because the educators serve in every capacity in the networks. They also offer educators the opportunity to play leadership roles without having to leave the classroom for jobs in school administration.

The networks create an enabling environment for educators to link more with their colleagues because when people hear of educators who are good in certain areas they recommend them to various groups and programmes that seek educators input.

On several occasions, schools and districts often turn to educators in the networks to conduct in-service workshops. Some schools and districts point out that they consult educator leaders for advice on textbooks, materials, and curriculum design and depend on them to lead professional development events. When educator's networks are firmly established they are able to inform officials about what works and what needs to be changed. The networks have legitimacy in the eyes of educators because they play a direct role in continuing professional development of educators and there is therefore a widespread feeling in the US that the more educators explore what the possibilities are for educator networks around subject matter, the better off the subjects would be.