

**RECTOR'S REPORT ON  
THE 4<sup>TH</sup> AFRICAN CONVENTION OF PRINCIPALS (ACP)  
HELD AT THE ABUJA INTERNATIONAL CONVENTION CENTRE (NIGERIA)  
13-19 AUGUST 2006**

**Welcome & Convention**

All delegates attending the 4<sup>th</sup> African Convention of Principals (ACP) received an exceptionally warm Nigerian welcome on arrival in Abuja, capital of Nigeria. Cultural events and speeches were all aimed at ensuring that we had a sense of the importance of the occasion as well as exposing us to the hospitality of the Nigerian hosts.

The Conference theme was *Free & Compulsory Education up to the Secondary School Level as a Tool for Poverty Alleviation* in Africa. The convention comprised 15 papers, delivered in traditional lecture style with a question/answer session after each paper. Most of the papers were by local Nigerian academics, which was disappointing in that it resulted in a strong Nigerian bias. However, the conference organisers had appealed for papers from across Africa and had a very poor response from participants.

Interesting themes and points that arose from the conference, which had a bearing on education in South Africa and on St Stithians College, are described below:

- **The Decline of Intellectual Endeavour**

Due to a large extent to corruption, Nigerian educators are finding it increasingly difficult to motivate pupils at school, who see local politicians, chiefs and civil servants and others managing to get rich quickly without the requisite educational qualifications. The ideal of success achieved through hard work, therefore, has been eroded and so it is more difficult to motivate pupils in the classrooms. It is absolutely imperative that countries in Africa combat the scourge of corruption, which has the effect of also undermining intellectual and educational capability in a country.

- **Education & Moral Development**

A number of speakers and commentators from the floor explored the non-formal elements of the school curriculum. Education was seen as a powerful moral force in society and it was imperative that schools are seen as beacons of morality and truth and so act as counters to some of the negative aspects that affect African countries (nepotism, corruption, gangsterism and militarism) and provide real moral lessons for the children of Africa. In particular, it was recognised that this moral force needed to be role-modelled in schools across the continent by the Heads. A number of African countries, especially in Nigeria at present, where rumours of examination fraud were rife, recognised that unless Principals have impeccable ethical standards, disservice is done to Africa and its youth.

- **Women in Education**

While only one paper at the conference pertained to the education of the girl child in Africa, it was recognised as a theme in a number of papers and discussion points at the conference. The key point arising from this is that poverty, population growth, infant mortality and other key social indicators, are improved far more dramatically with the education of girls on the

continent. However, often girls' education remains neglected because boy children continue to be more valued.

- **The debate around 9 or 12 years of education?**

While Africa is attempting to achieve universal access to education for all its children, the tendency is to only see this as far as nine years of schooling. Africa will never manage to pull itself into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century if it has such a limited view of universal education. It is imperative that this is extended to at least 12 years of schooling, if not 15-16 years which is the norm (including tertiary education) in the developed world.

- **State vs Private Education**

The bulk of delegates came from the state sector of education in their countries of origin and there tended to be a generally hostile attitude to the providers of independent/private education. In most African countries, however, since the 1990's a number of individuals have started privately owned schools (referred to in South Africa as proprietary-run schools), which are operated essentially to turn a profit for the owners. There are many examples cited of these schools being launched by unscrupulous operators and hence private education as a whole tends to be tarred with the same brush. It was recognised that in the main, schools aligned with mainstream churches, which in most cases tended to be the forerunners of education in Africa through the mission schools, were more readily accepted as providers of private education.

- **Education & Democracy**

In most African countries (and this applies to South Africa as well) an authoritarian culture exists within societies. Most countries (with the exception perhaps of Botswana) lived under colonial masters who were generally replaced by firstly popular elected leaders but very shortly thereafter autocratic (usually military) leaders. The culture is always one of looking upwards to those in power above one for guidance, leadership and in fact orders on how to run education, in schools, districts or provinces. This has tended to stifle initiative, self-reliance and local power, which has never been encouraged or allowed to flourish. Education has therefore not played a role in deepening the experience or understanding of democracy, as it has not been experienced or practised by educators. It is clear that democracy will only flourish once it has been experienced and practised by people at a grassroots level and when education translates into pupils, parents and teachers within schools. It was interesting that the conference did not seem to grasp this concept, as to a large extent the delegates seemed to be completely enamoured by those in power and positions of authority, who were looked up to almost purely in status terms. Therefore even if a paper presented to the conference was appalling and academically weak in its presentation and/or preparation (such as one of the papers on the appraisal of principals which was entirely based on educational journals and books published in the 1950's and 60's), the presenter was still hailed as an excellent speaker simply because he was a professor at a university. The inability to hold to account those in authority over a Principal or a school, means that schools in Africa will continue to entrench a culture of non-questioning of authoritarian control and thereby not assist in deepening a culture of accountability and democracy. This does not augur well for democracy on the continent.

- **The Role of the Principal & Leadership in Schools**

Given the above-mentioned problem, Principals or Head Teachers are seen simply as one or two steps up the status (and therefore payment scale) ladder of the educational bureaucracy. The conference recognised that Heads could play a real leadership role on the continent because they could act as agents of change, not only in their schools but in their broader communities as well. It was pointed out that conferences that are based on papers presented by academics take the power and ability of Heads to influence issues away from educators and places the locus of control elsewhere. Conferences like the ACP should be places where Principals can share, learn and discover through a range of their experiences across the continent about how to be better School Leaders and so ensure that they have a more profound effect on society.

- **Education & Development**

Most of the papers focussed on the lack of resources and educational facilities in most African countries. Many of the papers described how educational resourcing and finance had in fact got progressively worse since the era of independence in the 1950's and 60's. Many countries reported on how even teachers are less well educated than they may have been previously. It was also pointed out how central education is to any country and that without effective education Africa will remain a basket case in the world. Very few suggestions were made, however, as to how the situation could be improved. The model of leadership suggested that as a Principal one is not an agent of change and initiative, but instead one had a responsibility to those in authority. This attitude compounds the problem of inertia and impacts negatively on achieving development in Africa.

### **Visit to the South African High Commission**

David Wylde (President of the ICP), Edi Jacobs (President of SAPA) and I took the opportunity to visit the South African High Commission on 16 August 2006 and were hosted by the First Secretary, Mr Martin Malan. The purpose, nature and key challenges facing the embassy in Nigeria were explained, as were some of the difficulties that South Africans had in investing in Nigeria, in particular the problems encountered by ESCOM and SAA in trying to win key contracts with the Nigerians. The prevalence of crime and corruption in the country were described and this was particularly poignant in that the staff of the embassy had been robbed, *en route* to the bank that very morning, of all the visa application monies that the staff had collected. It was an interesting insight into the problems facing the High Commission in Nigeria.

### **Educational Field Trip**

A Field Trip was planned for 17 August 2006. The trip involved a visit to Ignatius Loyola College, which was an hour's drive from Abuja. The school was started essentially with the help of the Nigerian Government (a donation of land) and American and British Jesuits (building capital). The school fees fund the operational costs. The College is an independent Catholic school, based on the 400-year-old traditions of Jesuit education. It is a selective school, which accepts only 10% of all applications each year, on the basis of their performance in an entrance examination and a parental interview. The latter is crucial in the application process as the College is fully committed to ensuring that it offers an education of "mind and

heart". The President, Father Peter Schineller, was clear that it was essential that the College created leaders, who had a community consciousness, sensitivity and compassion, as they would become leaders in their fields of commerce, industry, the civil service and in politics. School fees were approximately 500 000 Naira per annum (approximately R 25k). Many of the Nigerian principals present felt that was a very reasonable price.

The President also spent some time describing in quite emotional and moving terms the effect on the College and families of an air crash on 10 December 2005, in which 60 of the school's pupils were killed. A total of 100 passengers died in this air tragedy. One family lost all three of their children; a few lost two children; and many one each. It is almost impossible to judge the impact of such an event on a school.

The next part of the Field Trip involved visits to the National Assembly and parliamentary buildings and the national stadium. There was an obvious glitch in the organisational arrangements in that delegates simply missed these two sites and were taken to a primary school in the Abuja district (approximately 40 kms from the CBD). Due to a lack of time, it was not possible to visit the school fully. The field trip, having started 2<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> hours late, highlighted some of the organisational and infrastructural problems that professional associations in a country like Nigeria have in organising such events.

The delegates also climbed a hill called KATAMKPE, which means a cup in the Gwari language, and is reputed to be the dead centre of Nigeria.

### **The Culture, People and Economics of Nigeria**

Apart from a few very large corporations and hotels, there does not appear to be a very developed formal economy in Nigeria. Many of the buildings in Abuja seemed to be incomplete, although many had very limited building activity happening on them. The formal economy includes transport systems, cars, minibuses and motorbikes, which are fast efficient and cheap (especially the motor bikes). Most of the housing settlements appear to be homemade houses, mainly of brick, unlike the corrugated iron homes in South Africa. Dozens of "businesses" operate within these houses. Most "shops" would be in the region of 10-12 square metres in size and a full range of goods and services are available in these "shopping malls". Pharmaceutical products; toiletries; food and sweets; television sets; motorbike, truck and car repair shops; Italian tiles – all are sold/operate from these tiny outlets. There are also numerous open-air markets dotted all around the capital and in fact a number of traders were entitled to come into the convention centre to ply their wares to the delegates. These shops are obviously owned by single proprietors or family setups.

### **Conclusion**

The convention and visit in general left one with an overwhelming sense of the challenges facing Africa in general and education in particular. The Nigerian hosts were overwhelmingly generous and warm in their reception of delegates to their country. Although here in South Africa the Nigerians' entrepreneurial spirit tends to be viewed through 419 scams, their population of 150 million people and their entrepreneurial zeal certainly stand on the cusp of greatness on the continent. It was heartening to see the number of teachers and Principals,

working in very difficult circumstances, trying to make a difference to the lives of their young charges, communities and societies.

At its final session, the conference adopted a constitution formally establishing the African Confederation of Principals (ACP). At that stage no representatives from either SAPA (South African Principals' Association) or SAHISA (Southern African Heads of Independent Schools Association) were present to endorse the establishment of the organisation. No doubt the South African heads associations will need to determine their participation in this new confederation.

The establishment of the ACP is a real tribute to David Wylde, the former Rector of St Stithians College, whose vision and initiative in 2000 lead to the hosting of the first African Convention of Principals at the College. This was followed by conventions in Accra (Ghana) in 2002 and Nairobi (Kenya) in 2004.

Much of the attention of the ACP and perhaps of the organisation will be to focus on the many problems besetting education on the continent and so it is perhaps important for a school like St Stithians to see itself as part of Africa and to participate in future conventions, even though the direct benefits to the College may not be so evident.

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