

LEARNING BRIEF

Communities of Practice for Social Systems Strengthening to Improve Child Wellbeing

Learning from the CoP Study: Guidelines to Support and Strengthen School Based Support Teams in the Foundation Phase

TANIA SANI

JUNE 2025

Introduction and Background

Why These Guidelines Are Important

Children's well-being, social welfare, and health directly impact their ability to learn. Strengthening the support systems around them—in their families, schools, and communities—can significantly reduce barriers to learning and improve overall social and educational outcomes. This guide shares how a collaborative, multi-disciplinary Community of Practice (CoP) approach can strengthen these support systems in primary schools. Aligned with South Africa's care and support policy framework, this approach aims to bridge gaps in education, health, and welfare support services for early-grade learners in under-resourced public schools.

Goal of the Guidelines

The goal of this guide is to strengthen School-Based Support Teams (SBSTs) by applying lessons learned from the CoP. As part of the intervention, Local Level CoPs (LLCoPs) were established in five under-resourced primary schools across Johannesburg, and one LLCoP in the under-resourced rural primary school in Moutse, Limpopo. The LLCoPs brought together a diverse group of professionals, including Foundation Phase Heads of Department (HoDs), teachers, social workers, community health workers, NGOs, and educational psychologists.

By working together, the LLCoPs empowered teachers to become key participants in identifying learning barriers and to participate in providing targeted support to learners. Teachers benefited from shared expertise and resources provided by the CoP team, which helped them address challenges more effectively. The guidelines offered in this document provide structured support to ensure the continued success of CoPs beyond the initial implementation. By embedding these collaborative practices in regular school routines, long-term improvements in learner support could be fostered.

Who Is This Guide For?

This guide shares the lessons learnt from the CoP with School-Based Support Teams (SBSTs) and District-Based Support Teams (DBSTs) as the key structures for delivering learner support services at the school level. It is also intended for teachers, school leadership, School Governing Bodies (SGBs), and Learner Support Agents.

Given that collaboration across sectors is central to the CoP approach, the guide also targets community and government stakeholders involved in supporting vulnerable learners. This includes professionals and paraprofessionals from health, social services, and community protection sectors who play an essential role in providing comprehensive support for children and their families.

How Were These Guidelines Developed?

The guidelines are rooted in a qualitative assessment of the CoP intervention process in five urban primary schools in Johannesburg and one rural primary school in Limpopo, where the CoP was piloted between 2020 and 2024. Insights are drawn from lessons learnt from six focus groups that were conducted with LLCoP participants, including principals, HoDs, teachers, social workers from the Department of Social Development (DSD) and the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE), as well as healthcare workers involved in the LLCoPs. Additionally, three focus groups were held with CoP social workers who had been active in the LLCoPs between 2021 and 2024 to explore their experiences.

The CoP was implemented at two levels: Advisory Level (ALCoP) and Local Level (LLCoP). The ALCoP included experts from universities, government departments, and local and international partners. This group was responsible for conceptualising the study's aims and guiding its design and implementation.

At the LLCoP level, each participating school formed a team of teachers, social workers, nurses, and other professionals. The primary role of the LLCoPs was to implement interventions and build community support networks. Coordinated by social workers, the LLCoPs focused on supporting children and families, making appropriate referrals to service providers, managing child well-being risks, and meeting regularly to track progress and address challenges. The coordination team played a vital role in linking the ALCoP and LLCoPs, ensuring effective implementation of interventions and the ongoing assessment of the project's impact.

Lessons learnt from the CoP study

Key takeaways from the LLCoPs were related to the importance of the coordinating structure within the LLCoPs. This structure was instrumental in bringing together multi-disciplinary teams to address the needs of children and their families holistically. The improved cooperation among diverse professionals led to more innovative solutions for strengthening families, who are central in promoting children's well-being. Additionally, the LLCoPs fostered mutual understanding and respect for the various roles within the team, enabling a more effective, collaborative approach to supporting learners.

However, successful collaboration across multiple sectors is not without its challenges. It requires considerable effort and commitment from all parties involved. Clear policy guidelines and protocols emerged as being essential to promoting cooperation and ensuring that the services provided are well-coordinated and comprehensive. LCoPs affirmed the need for strengthening School-Based Support Teams using the CoP approach. Embedding the CoP into existing School-Based Support Teams (SBSTs) provided the space for the delivery of more integrated and holistic interventions to support learners and their families.

Guidelines for School-Based Support Teams

In South Africa, children's rights to essential services like nutrition, shelter, health care, social services, and education are enshrined in Section 28(c) and Section 29 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa of 1996. These rights are further protected and operationalised through key legislation, including the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996, the Child Care Act 38 of 2005, and policies such as the Integrated School Health Programme (ISHP) of 2012. The ISHP, for instance, mandates the establishment of School-Based Support Teams (SBSTs) at the school level. SBSTs play a crucial role in fostering inclusive education by providing targeted support to learners facing barriers to learning and development.

This guide explains the roles, responsibilities, and composition of SBSTs, detailing who is responsible for their establishment and highlighting the critical need for cooperative efforts across the health, education, and social development sectors. This collaborative approach aims to strengthen support systems around learners and ensure that their right to education and holistic well-being are effectively met within the school environment.

Strengthening School-Based Support Teams

Key Functions of the School-Based Support Team (SBST)

SBSTs are essential to ensuring schools provide inclusive and supportive environments for all learners. Their primary function is to provide targeted support to learners facing barriers, ensuring they receive the necessary help to succeed academically and socially. The findings and conclusions of the CoP study demonstrate that the CoP approach could feasibly be infused into SBSTs thereby strengthening the workings and operational functioning of SBSTs.

Key responsibilities include:

- **Developing intervention plans** for learners considering academic, psychosocial, material, and health needs.
- **Coordinating multi-disciplinary support** from professionals and paraprofessionals involving teachers, health professionals, community health workers, social workers, auxiliary social workers, learner support agents and community support services among others.
- **Tracking learners'** progress to ensure they receive the support they need.
- **SBSTs place the child at the centre of the learning and development process.** However, the connection between the child, his/her family, the school and the community are integral to inclusive education and improved outcomes for children.

Setting Up and Running a SBST

a. Essential Components for Effective SBSTs

To establish a successful SBST, the following elements are crucial:

- **Composition of the SBST:** SBST coordinator, learner support specialists, HoDs, teachers, members of the School Management team (SMT), members of School Governing Bodies (SGB) and parents
- **Consider inclusion of a multi-disciplinary team:** The SBST should strive to be multi-disciplinary and include social workers, primary health care clinic nurses and community health workers, educational psychologists, occupational therapists, physiotherapists, remedial therapists, and Adopt-A Cop/Community Police Forum members. In resource-constrained schools, these persons can be community-based professionals and paraprofessionals who work for the provincial government, municipalities, local community-based organisations, and non-governmental organisations delivering welfare services in the community and services offered by academic institutions such as optometry and audiology assessments. Multi-disciplinary SBSTs provide opportunities for partnering, sharing resources and finding innovative solutions to overcome barriers to meet educational, psychological, social and health needs.
- **Implementation of the Integrated School Health Programme (ISHP) at a school level**
 - ◆ The **Integrated School Health Programme (ISHP)** is a joint initiative supported by provincial and municipal health services, local primary health care clinics, and the education and social development departments.
 - ◆ **How does it work?**
School Management Teams (SMTs), School Governing Bodies (SGBs), and School-Based Support Teams (SBSTs) help coordinate ISHP services within schools.

- ◆ **What does ISHP offer?**
 - ▶ **Health screenings** – Vision, hearing, oral health, motor skills, mental health, chronic illnesses, and nutrition
 - ▶ **Essential health services** – Immunisations, parasite control, and treatment for minor ailments
 - ▶ **Sexual and reproductive health (SRH)** – Information, support, and HIV & AIDS counselling and testing

The ISHP ensures that learners receive the healthcare they need to thrive in school and beyond.

- **Networking with other bodies to share resources and good practice experience.** SBSTs can be strengthened by networking with their cluster’s teachers from special/remedial schools, full-service schools, and other educational institutions (e.g. universities).
- **District collaboration:** District-Based Support Teams (DBSTs) play a crucial role in supporting SBSTs by providing guidance, resources, and expertise needed to address barriers to learning and development within schools. Establishing a close and collaborative relationship between the SBST and DBST is essential for effective service delivery. The SBST coordinator must take responsibility for coordinating and maintaining this collaboration. This structured partnership ensures that SBSTs have the necessary district-level support to address complex learner needs and that they foster a supportive and inclusive school environment for all learners.
- **Clear roles and responsibilities:** SBST roles and responsibilities should be concise and in written format. Teaching staff should have a clear understanding of the SBST’s responsibilities.
- **Clear processes:** Procedures need to be established for identifying learners needing support, making referrals, and communicating with relevant stakeholders (teachers, caregivers, external agencies).
- **Strong leadership:** The SBST should be coordinated by a passionate and knowledgeable senior teacher who ensures that the team stays on task and that regular meetings occur. There should be close collaboration between SBSTs and SMTs.
- **Flexibility:** SBSTs are dynamic and change over time to meet the schools’ challenges. They should be flexible enough to allow for the restructuring of team members’ portfolios and procedures for greater efficiency.
- **Strengthening the provision of social work services at schools:** The CoP demonstrated the role of social workers in school settings. Partnering between provincial and local government departments and non-profit organisations in leveraging social work services at school levels is critical to addressing the psychosocial needs of children and their families.

b. Regular Meetings

- SBSTs should ideally meet every six weeks to review cases, discuss interventions, report back on actions taken between meetings and plan the next steps. This process will sustain the momentum.
- A team member should be appointed to keep minutes of each meeting and record decisions and follow-up actions.
- Minutes of meetings should be shared and approved by the SBST. Meetings should be well structured with a clear agenda and roles for each team member, including delegation of tasks.

Practical Tips for Supporting Learners

a. Developing Individually Tailored Intervention Plans

Each learner requiring support should have an individual, tailored intervention plan compiled by the class teacher and the SBST. This plan should include:

- **Monitoring academic progress:** It is important to check with all teachers about the learner’s performance and if there are any concerns. Current and former teachers should be involved in this process, and if necessary, the teachers of the child’s siblings should be included to identify common patterns in the same families.
- **Educational psychology assessments:** The SIAS policy (Screening, Identification, Assessment, and Support) focuses on supporting vulnerable children facing learning barriers. It outlines the need for an educational assessment to be conducted. A three-stage process must be followed to determine the appropriate support.
 - ◆ Stage 1: The initial screening guided by the Learner Profile (Teacher)
 - ◆ Stage 2: Identifying and addressing barriers to learning and development at a school level (SBST)
 - ◆ Stage 3: Identifying and addressing barriers to learning at a district level (DBST). Education Psychologists are based at a district level and conduct educational assessments with children identified as needing extra support.
- **Health checks:** The first step should be to check for any vision or hearing impairments affecting the learner’s academic performance or behaviour. Identifying these limitations early ensures that barriers to learning are addressed before evaluating other aspects of the student’s academic progress (see list of community health services).
- **Nutritional needs:** Efforts should be made to ensure that vulnerable learners receive meals through the school feeding scheme by observing them at mealtimes. In cases where these learners are not eating meals, it may be

necessary to reach out to their caregivers to address the issue. Teachers can act as role models to learners by eating and enjoying the school meals together with children.

- **Engaging caregivers:** Meeting with parents or caregivers can help one to gain insights about the child's needs and gather their input on how best to support their child. WhatsApp or online meetings are an option for caregivers who cannot attend school meetings.
- **Home visits:** These visits provide a deeper understanding of children and their families' environment and challenges, enabling more holistic support from SBSTs. Social workers are not usually employed in under-resourced government schools. However, learner support agents and trained education assistants at schools, local NGO social workers, social auxiliary social workers, child and youth care workers and community health workers in the SBST can assist with home visits on behalf of SBSTs.

b. Involving a Multi-disciplinary Team

- **Invite professionals:** Social workers, community health workers, education specialists, and other relevant professionals should be invited to SBST meetings to provide additional perspectives and information on how to access services for learners.
- **Provincial and Local government resources:** The School Social Work unit from the Gauteng Department of Social Development (DSD), Social Workers from DSD, local authority social workers and the GDE should be invited to attend SBST meetings. The purpose of the meetings is to learn about the services and resources they offer, such as free school uniforms, food parcels, and skills development programmes for unemployed individuals. This exposure will help the SBST members to understand how to access these services to better support learners and their families.
- **Work with external organisations:** It is critical to build relationships with community organisations such as after-school programmes, feeding schemes, and NGOs that can offer further support to learners and their families, e.g., Childline, FAMSA, Teddy Bear Clinic, SANCA, SADAG.

Building and Using Networks

a. Engaging External Resources

- **Resource mapping:** A resource mapping exercise can be conducted with SBST members to identify all available support services in the community. Representatives from these organisations should be invited to SBST meetings to share information about their services and how the SBST can refer children and families to them.
- **Create a resource list.** Contact information should be shared with teachers, service practitioners, and caregivers regarding where to seek help. The resource lists need to be updated at least twice a year.
- **Collaborate with NGOs and universities:** It is important to identify NGOs that provide parenting programmes. University social work departments can be contacted to place social work students in your school for additional support.

b. Strengthening Social Capital

Social capital is the ability to draw on network relationships, knowledge, and resources. SBSTs can enhance their social capital by:

- **Establishing solid ties** with professionals and para-professionals (e.g., social workers, psychologists, occupational therapists, auxiliary social workers, and Community health workers) can assist in addressing learners' barriers to education.
- **Building relationships** with community members, such as local police, health workers, NGOs and Community Based Organisations (CBOs) can create a support network.

c. Teacher Collaboration

- **Support for teachers:** SBSTs must actively collaborate with teachers, especially those working with learners facing barriers to learning. They need to provide clear guidance and follow-up on interventions.
- **Teacher training:** SBST members should share their expertise with teachers, offering training sessions to enhance classroom support for learners.
- **Regular feedback:** Follow-up with teachers outside of SBST meetings can help to ensure continuity in support and implementation of recommendations.

Engaging Parents and Caregivers

Parents and caregivers play a vital role in the success of interventions for learners. SBSTs should:

- • **Involve caregivers early** in the intervention process and maintain open, empathetic communication.
- • **Provide opportunities for active involvement:** Parents should be encouraged to participate in school activities and attend informational talks.
- • **Offer flexible engagement options:** For parents unable to attend meetings, mobile or online platforms can be used to keep them informed and involved.
- • **Information and education campaigns:** Community radio campaigns are a useful way of reaching out to caregivers and families. Radio interviews and talks with multidisciplinary professionals and with parents can reach large audiences. Radio and Whatsapp messaging on health, nutrition, caregiver involvement in children's schooling, caregiver depression, and tips on managing difficult behaviours in children have been found to be effective in community outreach.

Overcoming Common Challenges in SBSTs

SBSTs may face several obstacles that can hinder their effectiveness, including the following:

- **Case overload:** Workloads need to be managed by distributing tasks among team members and setting priorities.
- **Time constraints:** Meetings should be scheduled in advance and ensure they are efficient and productive.
- **Lack of support:** If external agencies (e.g., the District-Based Support Team) are unresponsive, alternative support networks can be sought within the community.
- **Unclear roles:** It is important to ensure that all team members have clearly defined responsibilities and that these roles are documented to avoid confusion.

Best Practices for SBSTs

In order to ensure the success of SBSTs, it is important to adhere to the following best practices:

- **Multi-disciplinary teams:** Professionals should be included from various fields (e.g., teachers, social workers, psychologists, health workers) to provide comprehensive support.
- **Clear communication channels:** There should be regular communication with SBST members, teachers, caregivers, and external agencies. A WhatsApp group can be created to facilitate communication.
- **Professional development:** SBST members should participate in ongoing training to stay informed about the latest practices supporting learners with barriers.
- **Flexibility and adaptability:** SBSTs must be dynamic and able to restructure or change their approaches as the needs of the school and learners evolve.

Conclusion

The success of School-Based Support Teams lies in their ability to collaborate, communicate, and create strong networks both within and outside the school. By following these guidelines, teachers can ensure that SBSTs effectively support learners, reduce learning barriers, and create inclusive educational environments.

Some Useful Resources:

This guide offers a sample list of contacts, resources, and services available to schools. While not comprehensive, it highlights the range of government and non-government programmes and services that can support educational communities. We hope it inspires each School-Based Support Team (SBST) to create their own tailored directory of valuable contacts and resources.

Organisation	Service Provided	Geographical area	Contact
Childline South Africa	Assists families, schools and children with concerns about children. Through their free helpline, counsellors assist with matters related to physical, sexual abuse, bullying, substance abuse, behavioural problems and human trafficking, or general advice for children. Other services: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Therapy for abused children and their families ■ Training of volunteers ■ Prevention and education in schools ■ Training of professionals who work in child protection and with children ■ Court preparation for child witnesses 	National	National Toll-Free helpline: 116 (24 hours, 7 days a week, and free from all cell phone networks)
Life Line	Anonymous & confidential telephone counselling	National	24 hour National Counselling Line: 0861 322 322
Family Life Centre	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Counselling (individual, couple, marriage, family, grief, trauma, GBV support & Pre / Post Divorce counselling) ■ Training: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Anger management ◆ Basic counselling skills ◆ Couple counselling ◆ Grief Counselling ◆ Marriage Prep/enrichment ◆ Trauma Containment 	Johannesburg: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Parkwood ■ Westbury ■ Diepsloot ■ Soweto ■ Lenasia South ■ Alex 	Head Office: 011 788 4784 Office hours
SADAG (SA Depression & Anxiety Group)	Depression, Anxiety and mental health challenges telephone & online group support services	National	24/7 free support by phone: 0861 322 322
POWA (People Opposing Women Abuse) & Rape Crisis	Rape and Sexual Assault Counselling, to women and men, over the age of 16 years.	Gauteng & W Cape	POWA Helpline: 083 765 1235 Rape Crisis Counselling: 021 447 9762
Sophiatown Community Psychological Services	Free professional counselling services for individuals, families and children	Gauteng: Centres in Martindale and Bertrams, Johannesburg	011 673 6410

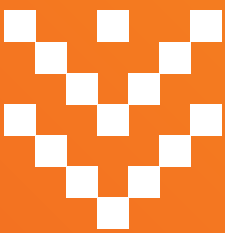
SANCA (SA National Council on Alcoholism & Drug Dependence)	Provide a range of services around the prevention and treatment of alcohol and drug abuse, e.g. counselling, support groups, rehab treatment, education programmes	National	National Head Office: 011 781 6410 www.sancanational.org.za
TEARS Foundation	Crisis intervention, advocacy, counselling, and prevention education services for those impacted by rape, domestic violence, and child sexual abuse	National	24/7 Toll Free line: 0800083277
JPCCC (Johannesburg Parent and Child Counselling Centre)	Child and family counselling, school-based counselling, child assessments and training	Johannesburg	011 484 1734
Johannesburg Child Welfare	JCW is an accredited Child Protection Organisation and Adoption Agency. It offers specialised social work services in statutory (court) work, adoptions and managing foster care placements. Intake services are provided for children up to the age of 12 yrs, who are at risk from abuse, abandonment or neglect.	41 Fox Street, Johannesburg	011 298 8500 Office hours
Department of Social Development (DSD): Gauteng	<p>The Department of Social Development (DSD) is the primary government agency providing social work services, including child protection and statutory support.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ DSD's School Social Work Unit offers: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Social work services to schools ◆ Educational programmes eg: anti-bullying ◆ School uniforms for vulnerable children ◆ Food support for children in need 	Gauteng	011 355 7600/56 / 011 227 0000
Teddy Bear Clinic	Offers a fully fledged service for abused children, including forensic medical examinations, forensic assessments, counselling, psychological testing and a diversion programme for youth sexual offenders.	Gauteng: Johannesburg; Krugersdorp & Soweto	Tel: 011 484 4554 Cell: 083 557 3720 Office hours

Specsavers – Kids’ Right to Good Eyesight Programme	Provide free eye screenings and reading glasses to all children between 6 and 12 years of age, at Specsavers branches	National	Book a free eye screening online at a Specsavers: www.specsavers.co.za/book-an-eye-test
University of Johannesburg – Optometry Clinic	Services include visual screening and optometric consultations, including paediatric optometry. Offer pre-arranged screenings for schools.	University of Johannesburg, Doornfontein campus - 154 Davies St, Doornfontein, Johannesburg	Book an appointment at 011 559 6074
University of The Witwatersrand Speech & Audiology Pathology & Hearing Clinic	Provide low-cost speech and hearing screenings	Wits University East Campus Braamfontein	011 717 4577 office hours. Must make an appointment
University of The Witwatersrand - Community Oral Health Outreach Project (COHOP)	Mobile dental services include emergency care, extractions, restorations, scaling & polishing and oral health education	Mobile dentistry trucks operating in underserved Johannesburg communities	Dr Yolanda Malele-Kolisa (HOD - Community Dentistry) Tel: 011 717 2593 Email: Yolanda.Kolisa@wits.ac.za

References:

- Fourie, J., 2017. *School-based collaborative support networks in fostering inclusive education in selected South African schools*. PhD thesis. University of Johannesburg. Available at: <https://scholar.ufs.ac.za/xmlui/handle/11660/7623> [Accessed 22 May 2025]. www.researchgate.net/publication/318361362_School_based_collaborative_support_networks_in_fostering_inclusive_education_in_selected_South_African_schools
- South African Institute for Distance Education (SAIDE). (2009). *Creating a caring school: A toolkit for school management teams with accompanying guide*. (1st ed.). Available at https://saide-web-prd1.saide.org.za/system/files/2024-01/toolkitintroduction_0.pdf
- UNHCR South Africa, n.d. *Resources for children and youth*. Available at: <https://help.unhcr.org/southafrica/get-help/children/>





Communities of Practice web link:
<https://communitiesforchildwellbeing.org/>