

Exploring the implementation of the TIME Home Learning programme and learning trajectories of 5- to 7-year-olds

The TIME programme in its ecosystem: What does it take for a school to commit to TIME?

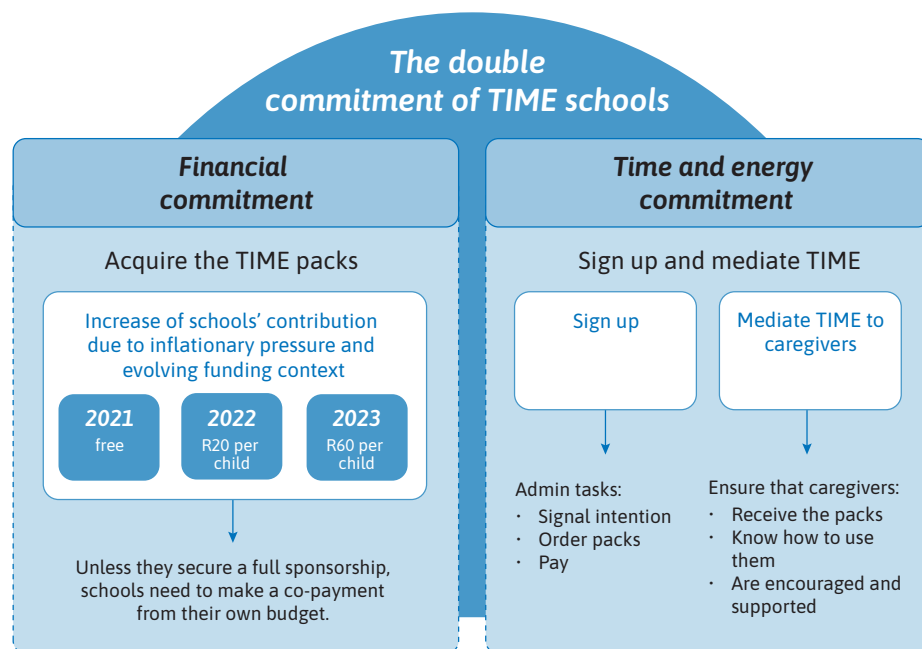
This brief was written for Wordworks by Magali von Blottnitz, with input from colleagues. It can be referenced as follows: von Blottnitz, M. (2024). Exploring the implementation of the TIME Home Learning programme and learning trajectories of 5- to 7-year-olds, Brief 3, Wordworks: Cape Town.

This is the third in a series of learning briefs that explore the implementation of the TIME Home Learning programme and learning trajectories of 5- to 7-year-olds. This brief is based on interviews held in 2022 with stakeholders from Western Cape schools. It focuses on schools' commitment to the TIME programme. A more detailed report on this topic is available on request¹.

What do schools commit to?

This learning brief is positioned within the context of the main implementation model for TIME, where TIME materials are mediated by schools for use at home (see Learning Brief 1, Model 1). In this model, schools sign up to implement TIME either in Grade R, Grade 1 or both. This usually involves a double commitment, as represented in Diagram 1.

Diagram 1: The double commitment of TIME schools.



This brief reviews:

- What factors played a role in schools' decision to either sign up for TIME, or to decline participation.
- How and to what degree schools were able to afford the financial cost of the TIME packs.
- Implications for the sector.

Methodology

To gather data for this specific brief, we constituted an initial sample of 11 TIME schools from the Wordworks network. For convenience, fieldworkers mostly selected schools which they knew from previous interactions in the HSP² programme. In February and March 2022, we interviewed school principals, Foundation Phase department heads, TIME liaison teachers, Grade R teachers of our sampled children, as well as members of the School Governing Body (SGB) in a few schools. Two further interviews took place in schools that had not signed up for TIME in 2022 to understand their reasons for declining to participate.

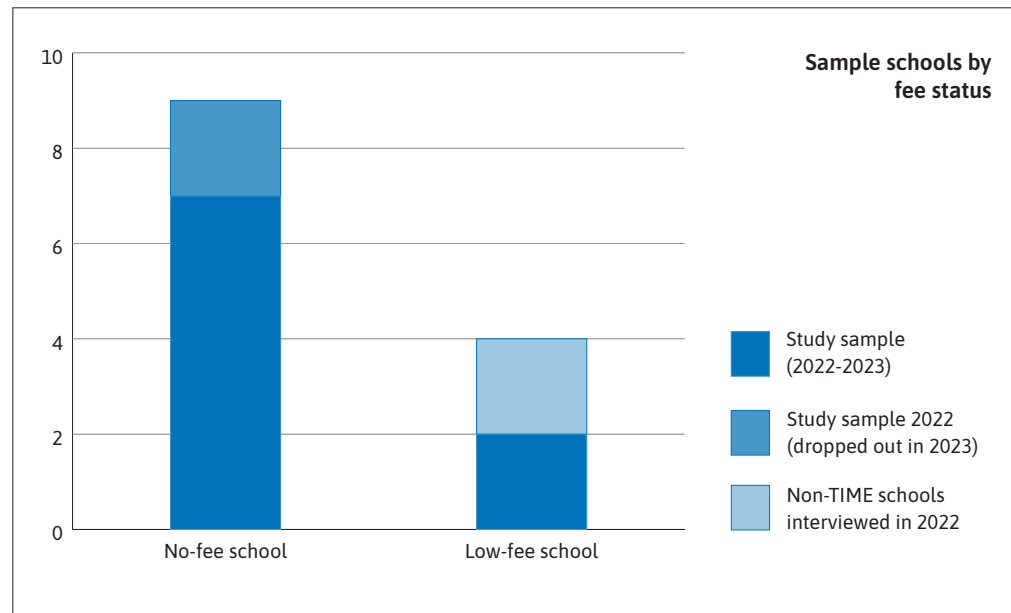
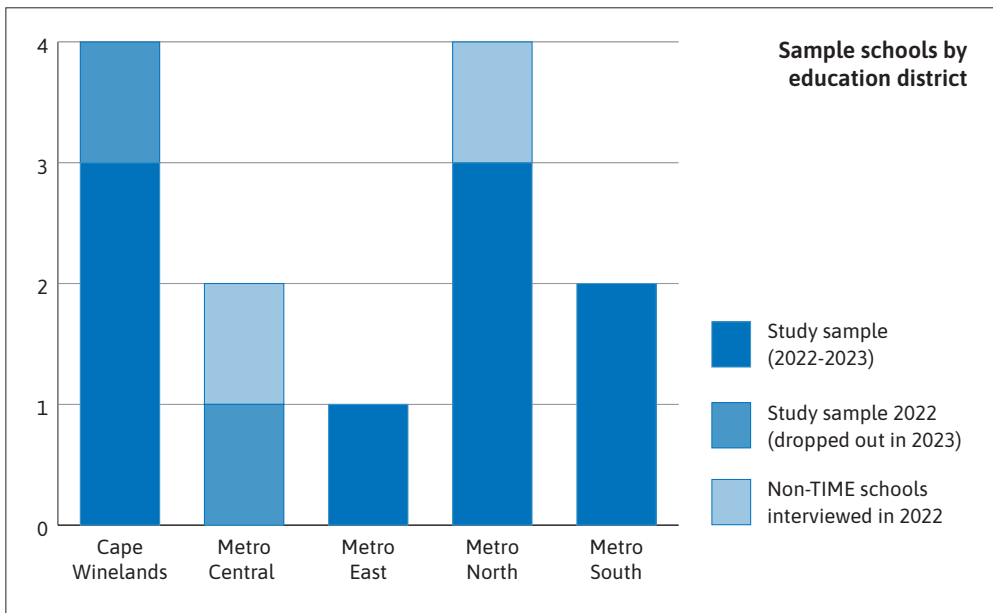
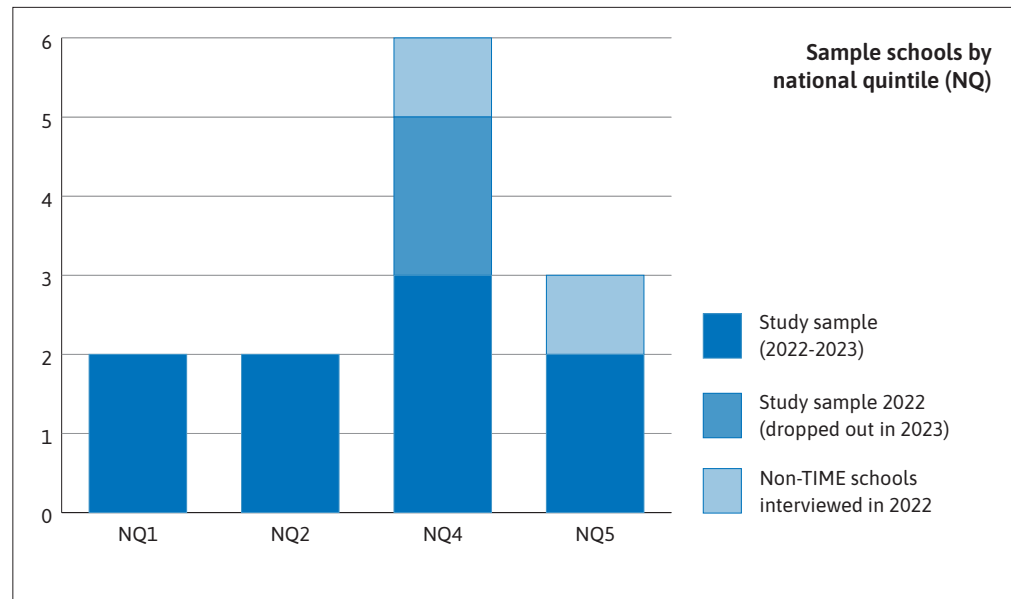
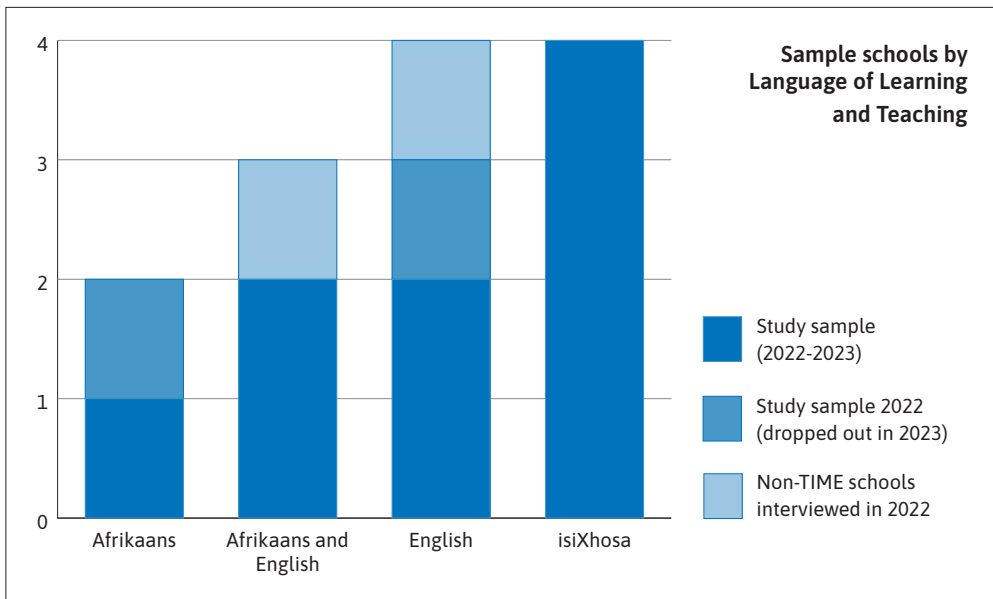
In addition to engagements with schools at the beginning of 2023 about their recommitment to TIME, additional rounds of interviews with teachers took place in August 2022 and in March to May 2023 – with a reduced sample because some study schools had not renewed their commitment to TIME in 2023.



¹ To request the report please email info@wordworks.org.za

² HSP: Home School Partnerships, another Wordworks programme directed at caregivers.

Diagram 2: Profile of schools in the sample



Factors influencing schools' decision to accept or decline TIME

We interviewed school principals, department heads and teachers at the beginning of 2022, soon after schooling was normalising after two years of COVID-related disruptions.

The schools that had committed to TIME and ordered packs, justified their choice by citing five main reasons, which are represented in Diagram 3a. Strategically, the TIME schools were schools that placed an intentional focus on Foundation Phase as a priority to recover from COVID-related gaps, but also schools determined to empower caregivers to play their part in their children's education. The fact that most of these schools were also offering the HSP programme attested to this commitment. The decision to commit to TIME was also prompted by a positive sentiment towards the TIME materials in particular and towards Wordworks in general – and in some cases, due to encouragement by district officials.

Conversely, the interviews at schools that did not sign up for TIME suggested that the following deterrents, summarised in Diagram 3b, were at play in their decision:

- a commitment to other programmes, which also required resources (both monetary and in time)
- a more pessimistic sentiment towards parent involvement, including the experience that getting caregivers on board requires a lot of “nagging”, and a frustration about perceived poor uptake of TIME in 2021
- financial constraints, especially in the context of loss of income during COVID
- a lack of encouragement by their district officials.

The financial constraints and the competing pressure of other programmes were particularly pressing in our engagements with schools in 2023, probably owing to the increased cost of the packs and the WCED's roll-out of various Foundation Phase interventions.

“ You can see what the pandemic did – there are gaps everywhere. You can see it in the children's handwriting, their talking, their sentence construction and fine motor abilities.

Principal,
School H

My feeling is that our parents want to be involved with their children to help them, but they don't know how.

Principal, School L

Everything for a young child is there [in the TIME packs]. There's life in these materials, you can ask so many questions, you can do so much about it.

Grade R Teacher,
School B

Diagram 3a: Motivators for the decision to sign up for TIME

Motivators in 2022		
1	Learning gaps post COVID	• Foundation Phase a priority
2	Need to support caregiver involvement	• Perception that caregivers are eager but need help
3	Attractiveness of materials	• Teachers want to have them, even for themselves
4	Wordworks' reputation	• Good experience with other programmes
5	Encouragement from district	• Subject advisor • Circuit manager

Diagram 3b: Deterrents to the decision to sign up for TIME

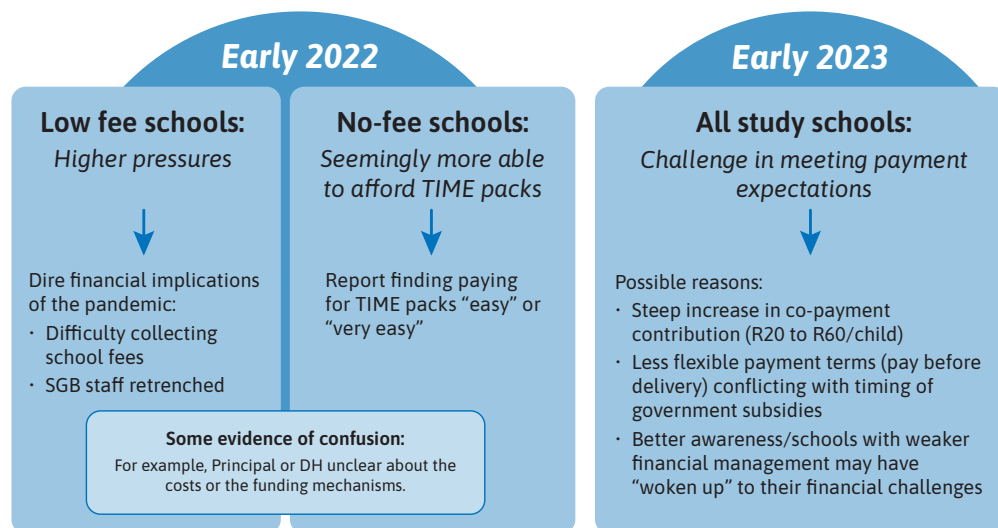
Deterrents in 2022		
1	Prioritising other programmes	Desire to focus/manage workload
2	Worries about engaging caregivers	“Nagging” and prompting
3	Mixed feelings about TIME success	Previous year frustrating
4	Financial constraints	Loss of income during COVID
5	Poor awareness from district	Lack of encouragement

Schools' ability to fund the purchase of TIME packs

In an attempt to explore the feasibility of a model where NPOs would be less dependent on donor funding, and after confirming with the WCED that schools could use a portion of their LTSM³ allocation to acquire TIME packs, Wordworks decided to test a co-payment model, whereby the schools would contribute to the cost of printing the TIME materials. The rationale was that, if schools were willing and able to use their own funds towards acquiring these high-quality and comparatively inexpensive resources, this would enhance the scalability and sustainability of the programme. However, it was important that this should not happen at the expense of the least-resourced schools or households.

We explored this aspect first in 2022 through interviews with principals and various role-players at the schools, and revisited it in 2023 when Wordworks observed payment difficulties after increasing the schools' co-payment amount. Diagram 4 represents the key findings.

Diagram 4: The affordability of TIME packs for study schools – 2022 and 2023 observations



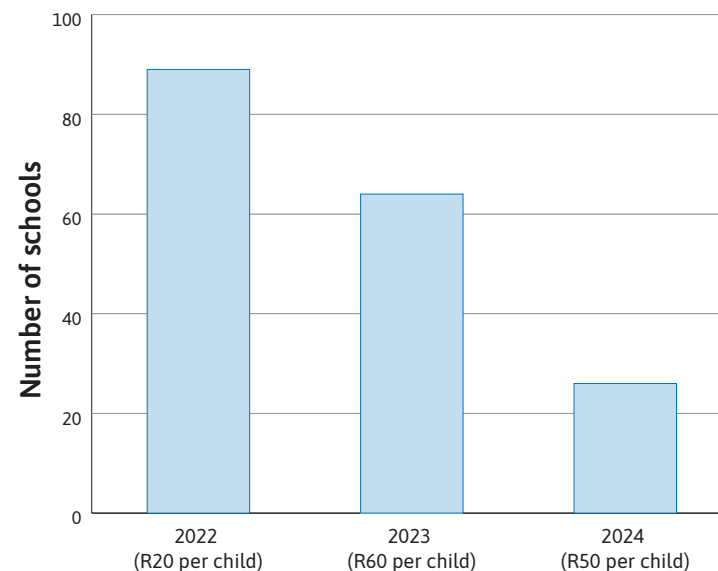
In 2022, low-fee schools expressed concern about the funding of packs, as the pandemic years had affected their financial situation, especially with challenges of collecting fees. Many of these schools requested payment from caregiver for the TIME materials. However, they reported feeling frustrated about collecting those payments, as some parents failed to pay, even after many reminders.

In contrast to low-fee schools, in 2022 most no-fee schools expressed confidence in their ability to self-fund the packs. However, they found themselves unable to pay for the materials in 2023. Apart from the increase in the cost, there may be several reasons for this change:

- The detrimental financial effect of the pandemic may have been felt later in no-fee schools, perhaps due to gaps in early warning systems. For example, our 2022 interviews produced little evidence of the study schools consulting their SGBs for approval of the expense of TIME packs, or of TIME being formally included as an item in the schools' budgets.
- Statements by some school stakeholders in 2022 about the affordability of the packs, may have been clouded by misunderstandings about the cost of the co-payment and the funding model.
- The strict payment terms in 2023 have made it more difficult for some schools to make payments in time – schools usually receive their government subsidies at the end of Term 1, but needed their packs earlier in the year in order to implement TIME during Term 1.

Overall, between 2022 and 2024, Wordworks observed a drastic drop in the number of schools that self-funded TIME packs (see Diagram 5a). The shift in funding models used by schools in the study sample is represented in Diagram 5b.

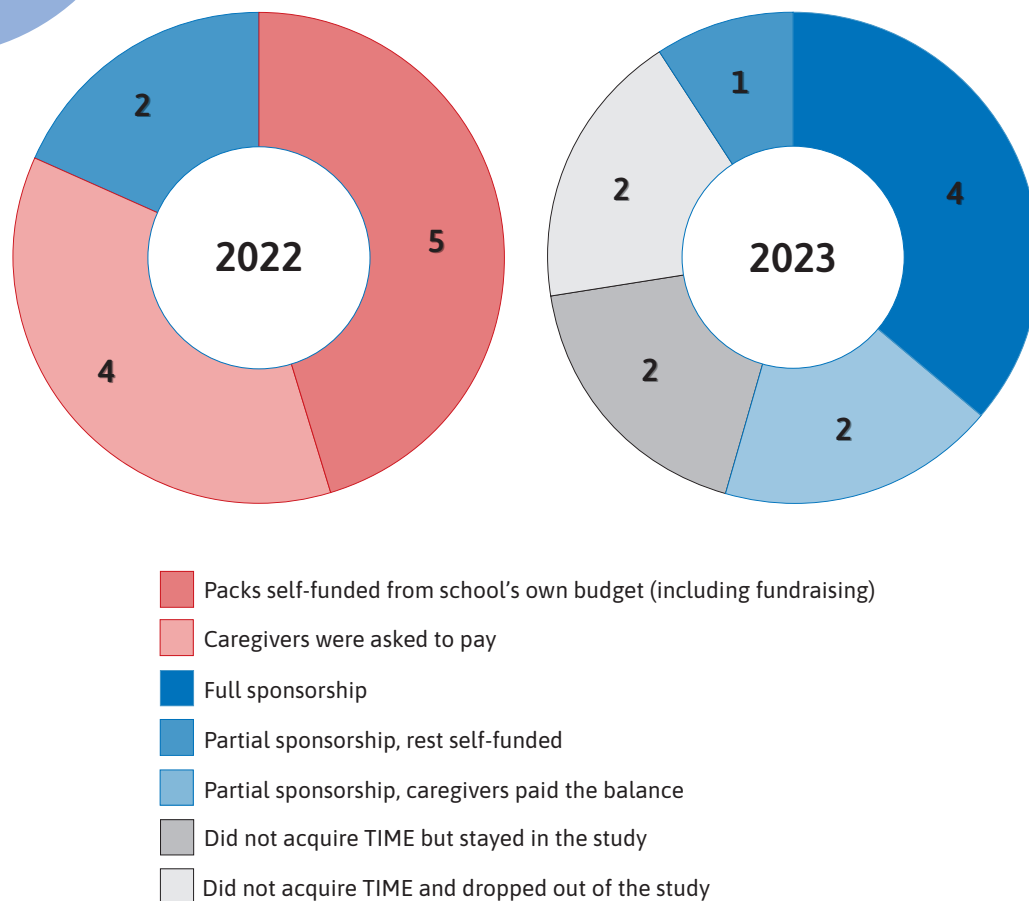
Diagram 5a: Number of Wordworks schools self-funding part or all of the cost of TIME packs



Source: Wordworks internal monitoring data

³ LTSM: Learning and Teaching Support Materials. A portion of the school funding provided by the Department of Education is earmarked for the acquisition of such materials.

Diagram 5b: How the 11 TIME Study schools funded TIME packs in 2022 and in 2023



Source: Interview data from TIME study schools and own programme monitoring records

The time and energy commitment: Schools' ability to manage the programme, on-board and support caregivers

When the main data collection for this learning brief took place (February to March 2022), the expectations on schools in terms of mediation were not fully documented and specified. Therefore, the interviews included open-ended questions to understand how different schools were approaching the communication with, and support of caregivers and children regarding their engagement with TIME at home. The study process was also responsive to incidental data that surfaced about other aspects of the schools' management of the programme.

The study evidence revealed some variability in how the schools approached the following aspects:

- Programme-related administration: The three steps to obtain TIME packs (1: express an intention to do the programme, 2: order the materials, 3: send proof of payment) were not always well understood.
- Initial communication with caregivers: Finding the optimal mix between face-to-face communication and written messages proved difficult, especially where caregivers had difficulty attending meetings and/or where smartphone access was not universal.
- Ongoing support and monitoring: The desire to provide consistent support and motivation needed to be balanced with the limited amount of time available to teachers in addition to their normal workload.

These three aspects are described in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Themes, good practices and challenges in managing and mediating the programme

		Risks	Best case	Some challenges observed
Sign-up	Managing the programme-related admin	School is confused/ misses a step	School on top of all processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confusion between Wordworks programmes (TIME and HSP) • Confusion between expression of interest and order • Miscommunications around payment
	Initial communication to caregivers	School relies on one single, non-inclusive channel	School uses multiple channels and is mindful of access constraints	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poorly attended parent meetings • Over-reliance on WhatsApp in communities where many don't have a smartphone • One-directional communication (not allowing for feedback or questions)
Mediate	Ongoing support and monitoring	Either no ongoing support (engagement drops) or excessive monitoring efforts	Teachers maintain a community of caregivers who share spontaneously and don't need reminders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers don't find the time to follow up with caregivers (pressure of other programmes) • Frequency of follow-ups drops as the year progresses • Teachers get overwhelmed from controlling every child's pack and marking their activities
	Ongoing communication			
	Monitoring the engagement with activities			

The topic of teacher mediation will be explored in greater depth in Learning Brief 5.

Implications for the sector: Opportunities and pitfalls of co-payment models

With increasing pressures on non-profit organisations (NPOs) to decrease their dependence on donor funding and take steps towards self-sustenance, many NPOs may be considering asking their beneficiaries (in this instance, schools) for a contribution towards the costs of their offering. Doing so is sometimes the only way to continue offering a programme if other sources of funding have not been forthcoming. Potentially, it also presents the advantage of securing higher commitment levels of the beneficiary.

The main lesson from the setback experienced by Wordworks in seeking self-sustenance of TIME through a co-payment model is the realisation that the goodwill of beneficiaries is fragile. Their willingness to pay for a service may be quickly eroded if multiple unfortunate circumstances accumulate. Such circumstances include:

- the NPO asking for payment for something which was previously provided for free
- the beneficiary experiencing a steep year-on-year increase in the cost of the programme
- the NPO having limited possibilities to explain the situation due to a disconnect with the beneficiary's decision-makers (in Wordworks' case, school management).



Specifically, with regard to the willingness and ability of schools to spend their own funds to purchase NPO resources, Wordworks has learnt that:

- Such willingness will depend on the school's financial situation and on the levels of financial controls in place, which can fluctuate. The ability of low-fee schools to afford payment will depend (among others) on their ability to collect fees.
- Schools may try to recoup the costs by asking families to pay, however, this adds more problems than it solves.
- While schools may be keen to invest in materials that their teachers will be able to use for a few years, they may be less enthusiastic if the materials need to be repurchased every year.
- The terms of payment are an important aspect of affordability because government subsidies are usually paid around March or April.

Although NPOs rarely have in-house marketing resources comparable to those of a for-profit business, bringing a product or service to the market requires the ability to manage not only the payment streams, but also all the brand implications of how the product or service will be positioned and advertised.

Similarly, any offer that relies on schools' investment of time and effort, must take into account the internal capacity of the schools, both in terms of administration processes and the teachers' capacity to sustain efforts that may not fully link with their core role in the classroom.

