

What are the champions in your school community doing?

By Jo Monson

The Caring Schools Project is searching for "champions" of children's rights in every school community. "A champion is someone who sees a need and cannot sit back — they move to act, they get involved and they get others involved."

The Caring Schools Project is a joint initiative between SADTU and the Children's Institute and is the short name for the "schools as nodes of care and support project". It aims to help schools mobilise role players in their schools and broader communities to provide a greater level of care and support to vulnerable children. The key strategy for this is to identify a number of champions in every community who can lead the process. These champions come from both the school itself and the broader community.

Just what is a champion? At a workshop held with 12 educators — each one a champion in their own school and the community — we found out some of what goes into making a real champion.

First of all, a champion has a big feeling of love for the world and is someone who decides to listen to their heart. This gives them passion and fire! A champion also has compassion and empathy, but as the champion workshop participants were quick to point out, compassion doesn't mean doing

things for others that they can and should be doing for themselves.

A champion gets scared and frustrated and angry just like other people. The difference is that a champion knows they can choose how to respond: either positively or negatively and the champion makes the positive choice. In this way, a champion is able to respond to challenges and problems and find creative ways of solving them.

A typical champion is able to motivate and enroll people into his or her vision. Champions network and get the support needed for action. This is not to say that they wait for others before they take action. They are people driven from within, confident that others will join in along the way and not easily discouraged.

For many, the "turning point" that made them shift from ordinary educators and principals into champions, had simply been success with one child that gave them the confidence and the courage to start helping more.

One of the participants told a story about one of her learners who lost his parents and was exploited by his family who required him to do chores rather than go to school. She intervened by speaking with the family about the rights of the children and threatening to report this abuse to the police. It was a big moment when this child started attending school again and she realised she



"A champion acts from the heart." Nokuzola Ndabambi, Principal of Sinempumelelo Primary School and champion for children's rights

could help lots of other children.

The Caring Schools Project is currently in four schools in the Free State and four schools in the Western Cape. Ultimately the programme will be rolled out nationally. If you know of any champions of children's rights in your school community we would like to know about them.

Alternatively if you would like more

information about the Caring Schools Project, please contact Shermain Mannah at SADTU at e-mail smanna@sadtu.org.za; postal address PO Box 6401 Johannesburg 2001; fax: (011) 334 4836038; or write to Norma Rudolph at the Children's Institute at e-mail norma@rmh.uct.ac.za; postal address 46 Sawkins Road, Rondebosch, Cape Town 7700; fax: (021) 689 8330.