

“Privileged to partner”

**Remarks by Margie Keeton,
Trustee of the Epoch and Optima Trusts,
at the opening of the
Mathematics Centre,
St Andrew’s College and DSG,
Grahamstown**

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It is a real pleasure and privilege to be participating in this function this morning. Most speakers at school events start with a sentence like this, but in my case the comments have a deeper significance. The pleasure part is true because as an old girl and a parent it fills me with pride to see the leadership and commitment that DSG and St Andrews are showing in the field of maths education. The privilege part is also true because as a trustee of the Epoch and Optima Trusts which have partnered the schools in this important initiative, it is special to see champions at work who are committed to excellence and expanded opportunity for all their learners.

The existence of our Epoch and Optima Trusts comes about through a longstanding appreciation at founder Anglo American that more than a “business as usual” response is needed from the private sector to address the critical situation of far too few good matric maths passes in South Africa’s schools.

Ours are independent trusts that have chosen to focus on maths in schools not because they believe it is the only subject that counts, but because experience shows that if you can get maths right at a school, you will get most other things right too. And in the process you will have set your learners up for success in whatever career they choose to pursue.

To date the trusts have invested some R70 million in the efforts of over 100 schools around the country that have responded positively to the challenge set them through this funding to push the edge of the envelope in their maths teaching. The major focus of this spending is and will continue to be the strengthening of performing but under-funded public secondary schools that can produce growing numbers of learners

(and in particular disadvantaged learners) with strong maths passes, and so to enhance the future skills base in South Africa.

But Epoch and Optima have chosen also to embrace independent schools with proven track records in maths, recognising that they have the opportunity and we would argue the responsibility, to expand the quality end of our country's performance in maths. The challenge Epoch and Optima put to schools like St Andrew's and DSG is not just to build or refurbish fancy facilities like this one, but to use them in ever more imaginative and effective ways to grow the numbers of learners taking high level maths in all its forms and the quality of the passes they achieve. And to apply all the hard work, creative energy and dedication to succeed in this – because that is what success in maths requires from teachers, learners and school leadership. And then to pass on the methodologies and techniques you have pioneered in the process to other schools that don't have the teaching and resource base to develop them for themselves.

What Epoch and Optima are asking of schools like these is an end to "Cremora type" interventions around maths excellence by which I mean efforts that are "not inside, but on top". Maths excellence needs to

become part of the every day at independent schools, part of their very identity and purpose. Something done in the immortal words of John F Kennedy when launching the US programme to put a man on the moon, “not because it is easy, but (precisely) because it is hard”.

May this maths centre and all the associated work it has already given rise to, truly come to embody the efforts and respective mottos of these great schools – Nec Aspera Terrent and En Avant - just as much as they do for other areas of school life where the boys and girls here aspire to be the best.

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