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Rally To Read: Two for the price of one

An innovative sponsorship offer may just have brought Rally to Read fundraising targets within reach

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Picture: Gallo Images/Paul Weinberg

The value of the rand has just doubled. The Jonsson Foundation, Rally to Read's lead partner, has pledged to match new 2020 sponsorships rand for rand up to a total of R500,000. This means anyone donating R1,000 will effectively be putting R2,000 into the programme.

Economic chaos caused by the Covid-19 pandemic has forced many companies to slash or even halt their corporate social investment (CSI) spending. Private donors are also feeling the pinch. Rally to Read, which revives rural primary schools neglected by overstretched provincial education departments, is not immune.

That's why the offer from the foundation – the CSI arm of the Jonsson Workwear group – is so important. Even with a skeleton 2020 Rally to Read programme, organisers still need more money to make it happen.

Six rallies were planned for 2020. The Mpumalanga event, hosted by Ford, happened in March, before Covid-19 took hold. Shell SA, which hosts a KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) rally near Pietermaritzburg each year, has confirmed it will continue to support its schools.

That leaves four rallies – in the KZN Drakensberg, the Western Cape, the Eastern Cape and the Free State. Sponsors have pledged nearly R900,000 for these so far, but organisers estimate they need another R1m to meet their commitments.

Jonsson's offer can make a huge dent in that target.

Over half the pledges so far are for the Western Cape, so the offer is limited to the Drakensberg, Eastern Cape and Free State programmes. It applies to pledges made from July 23.

In initial planning for the 2020 programme, a full sponsorship would have cost R36,000 and a partial one R18,000. Some sponsors have maintained that support, but for many others, already cutting costs to protect jobs and profits, it is no longer realistic.

The reduced budget, and Jonsson's participation, allows organisers, including the FM, to accept smaller donations.

Rally to Read has made a significant contribution to rural primary education since 1998. Thousands of far-flung schools receive little or no support from their provinces. Many lack books, paper, pencils, electricity and even basic sanitation. The average 14-year-old rural child has a reading age of seven, rendering them incapable of high school education.

This literacy gap is bridged at Rally to Read schools, and growing numbers of children are progressing not just to high school but also to college and university.

Every school is supported for three years. To abandon them, even for one year, would risk undoing everything that has been achieved so far in the current set of schools, which are at different stages of the programme.

Rally to Read works to a very simple formula. It delivers stationery and portable classroom libraries stocked with reading books selected individually for each school. SA's leading education NGO, the Read Educational Trust, provides teacher training, and monitors every school's performance to ensure it is making proper use of the resources.

In past years, sponsors have delivered goods in person. The "rally" part of the programme name refers to offroad weekends when sponsors, accompanied by families or colleagues, travel in convoy to schools and meet the children they are helping, as well as their families and the local community.

Clearly, social distancing and other Covid-induced precautions make the remaining 2020 weekends – which were due to happen between now and October – impossible.

Some sponsors, however, have found a way to maintain personal interaction during the pandemic. Mercedes-Benz is among a number to provide personal protective equipment to schools.

This continues Rally to Read's history of "extracurricular" sponsor involvement. In the past, some have provided sports equipment or computers, organised schools' electrification and even sent in volunteer work parties to rebuild classrooms.

The fact that many schools are closed at present does not mean money raised is wasted. It is destined to provide resources for the 2021 school year, starting in January, when SA children could be back in the classroom. Even if there is a delay, organisers are already preparing contingency plans to ensure the children continue to receive a proper education.

**For more information, or to become a sponsor, visit the new website, rallytoread.org.za*