

Press Release

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South African Institute of Race Relations

The power of ideas

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Liberation for the ‘born frees’

A voucher system for school education would do more than anything else to liberate South Africa's generation of ‘born frees’, says the IRR (Institute of Race Relations).

Referring to promises earlier this year by the minister of basic education and training that she would make aggressive interventions in the next five years to fix education, the IRR said this was bad news for a six-year-old boy or girl preparing to enrol in January next year in one of the country's 20 000 dysfunctional schools.

‘These children will have to wait until they are 11 years old until the minister fixes their education – if she fixes it.’ However, says the IRR, ‘the good news is that more and more parents are not prepared to wait that long. Instead, they are sending their children to private schools or to good fee-paying state schools’.

The challenge, adds the IRR (in a report by John Kane-Berman in its *@Liberty* policy bulletin), is to give as many children as possible the choice now available only to a relatively small number. A universal bursary system – usually known as a voucher system – would do this.

Instead of the state providing education, it would hand vouchers to parents to enable them to buy education for their children from the school of their choice.

Kane-Berman says the idea of a voucher system originated with Milton Friedman in 1955. Its essence is to give parents choice. Various studies have shown that choice means improvements in education. Where private or charter schools compete head-on with bad government schools, the latter are compelled to up their game or close.

Most of South Africa's ‘born frees’, Kane-Berman says, faced dismal educational prospects because 80% of government schools do not work. The minister is asking for another five years to fix dysfunctional schools, but the ANC government has already had 20 years during which it has probably made things worse for the great majority of schoolchildren.

Not only in South Africa but in a great many other countries as well, parents are opting to pull their children out of poorly functioning state schools, he adds. This is a quiet revolution being led by some of the poorest people on the planet in some of the poorest countries on the planet.

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