

FREEING EDUCATION

**The future of the Class of 2020:
How to build a bright education future**

*#FreeOurEducation
from the clutches of failing politicians*



South African Institute of Race Relations

The power of ideas

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Freeing Education

The future of the Class of 2020: How to build a bright future and #FreeOurEducation

The Class of 2020 does not have to face a gloomy future, trapped in the policy failures of the past and the present. While politicians proudly announce the matric pass rate each year, this pass rate alone does not tell the full story. South African students lag behind their global peers on a number of levels, for example, South African pupils ranked very poorly in the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS). In 2015, the performance of South African grade five learners for maths was found to be the second worst. Of the 49 countries tested, South Africa came 48th, above only Kuwait. Similarly, South Africa did poorly in the grade eight maths ranking, too – again, having subjected grade nines to the test instead. Set against the performance of the grade eights of the 38 other countries that participated in TIMSS in 2015, South Africa was again second last, scoring only above Saudi Arabiaⁱ.

At the same time many schools in South Africa hire staff, primarily teachers and principals, based on questionable grounds removed from merit. Often, hiring practices are shrouded in suspicion of trade-union affiliation appointments and promotionsⁱⁱ. This means of filling posts further brings into question the quality of teaching at schools around the country, many of which see large numbers of students drop out before reaching matric. While the media often reports on the year's matric pass rate, the more important statistic is the number of Grade 1s who would go on to pass matric twelve years later. In 2019 this was just 38.9%ⁱⁱⁱ.

The Institute of Race Relations (IRR) possesses a wealth of research regarding possible solutions to these education problems. Presented below are some habits of successful schools in South Africa – both poorer no-fee schools as well as wealthier former model-C schools – along with some past solutions put forward to fix the education crisis in South Africa.

Independent schools *versus* government schools

On average, pupils in independent schools in South Africa achieve much better National Senior Certificate results than do their counterparts in public schools. This applies to the overall pass rate, as well as to the higher “bachelor” pass rate required for admission to university to study for a degree. Dissatisfaction with lower pass rates in public schools has generated demand for more independent schools, including low-fee independent schools.

This is easily demonstrated by comparing the of results public and private schools. As an example, from 1994 to 2017, independent schools in South Africa have collectively have never had a pass rate lower than 94% or a bachelor’s pass rate of less than 70%. By contrast, in 2017 public schools achieved just a 75% pass rate and a mere 29% bachelor’s pass rate^{iv}. The difference makes it strikingly clear that private schools outperform public schools. There are a number of factors which explain this. Independent schools are more likely to hire teachers based on merit. This is partially due to being better funded than public schools, but also can be attributed to their higher degree of independence from the negative influences of government interference – for example, the corrupt relationship between the South African Democratic Teachers Union and the Department of Education in many provinces.^v Independent schools face far fewer barriers to implementing the good habits of successful schools listed below.

Habits of highly effective schools

Here follows a list of some practical and easily implementable solutions with track records of educational improvement and upliftment:

School vouchers

South Africa should introduce a comprehensive system of education vouchers to level the educational playing field. The vouchers – to be spent solely on education – would be tantamount to a universal bursary system.

The current amount of almost R250 billion that the state spends each year on paying teachers and running schools should be redirected to parents in the form of vouchers worth some R12 000 each.

The vouchers would be distributed in the form of smartcards on proof of ID of parents and children via filling stations, national retail chains, cellphone outlets, or any other existing national network. This would enable parents to buy schooling wherever they chose.

More and more parents are already trying to avoid dysfunctional state schools, as shown by the growing number of private or independent schools in South Africa, including schools run as businesses.

South Africa is fortunate in also having some excellent state schools, to which very large numbers of township children are commuting on a daily basis.

If vouchers were provided to everyone, then all families would have the choices currently available to only relatively few. School vouchers would be a big step towards equality of opportunity and broad-based empowerment. The critical objective is to introduce competition throughout the education system, as schools will have to compete for voucher-bearing customers in the form of pupils. Schools unable to attract or retain pupils will have to close. This will ensure that schools are run in the interests of pupils rather than in the interests of teachers.

Give principals disciplinary power

Ensure that all schools are headed by principals able and empowered to enforce discipline. The department should consider giving all public schools disciplinary powers, including the power of expulsion, subject to specified guidelines.

Ensure an adequate supply of suitably qualified teachers

Allow the schools themselves great discretion in hiring and firing of teachers. Ensure that hiring is based on merit and not trade union affiliation.

Strengthen School Governing Bodies (SGBs)

Allow for more power in decision making by SGBs. This is in order to encourage greater involvement in schools by parents and thus encouraging them to become more invested in their child's education.

The “no fee” policy

This could be done by earmarking part of the child support grant of R350 per month per child up to the age of 18 for school fees. It would help to encourage greater parental involvement in the school, while at the same time providing at least some income for the hiring of additional teachers.

Be wary of overriding decisions by SGBs

Since the principal of any school is so vitally important to its success, education departments should be extremely wary of overriding the recommendations of SGBs and imposing unwanted principals upon them or upon parents in general.

Shout it from the rooftops: celebrate the successes of no-fee public schools in poor communities

Education departments should find ways to celebrate and publicise the success of no-fee public schools serving poor communities, giving full credit to their principals and their teachers. Beyond that, government should concentrate its major efforts on helping other such schools to emulate the successes of these schools. Even though no-fee public schools have less in terms of human and other resources than suburban schools, in interaction with the IRR, principals from these schools make no complaints about this. These admirable men and women displayed pride in their schools and determination to overcome whatever difficulties they face^{vi}. It is only right that they be celebrated as beacons of success by the Department of Education so that they may be an example to other struggling schools.

Conclusion

In general, three things can be said about successful schools in South Africa: They are meritorious in all aspects of school life from academics to hiring staff, parents of pupils are actively involved in school life, and they are more independent of top-down governmental decisions.

When viewing the ways in which some schools in South Africa have become successful, it is clear that less involvement from the state and more involvement from the community is a common denominator. Independent schools with vastly more say over admissions and hiring of pupils and teachers excel in academics far beyond public schools. The IRR's research shows that the public schools which do well are those which are integrated into the families and communities of their pupils. This creates an effective investment in the children's education by the parents of those children and, thus, better results are produced. There is a great potential to use these means of improving education and applying them all over the country, especially to poorer schools in townships or rural areas. This is a way of making a meaningful improvement in the education of South Africans from poorer backgrounds, even if more funding is not available.

ⁱ Institute of Race Relations, 2018, *The South African Education Crisis Giving Power Back to Parents* p.2

ⁱⁱ Institute of Race Relations, 2018, *The South African Education Crisis Giving Power Back to Parents* pp.7-8

ⁱⁱⁱ BusinessTech, 7 January 2020, *Matric 2019: Real pass rate is 38.9%*

^{iv} Institute of Race Relations, 2019, *South Africa Survey*, p. 517

^v Institute of Race Relations, 2018, *The South African Education Crisis Giving Power Back to Parents* pp.7-8

^{vi} Institute of Race Relations, 2018, *Achievement and Enterprise in School*, p. 11



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