



South African Institute of Race Relations

The power of ideas



The South African EDUCATION CRISIS

GIVING POWER BACK TO PARENTS

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THE SOUTH AFRICAN EDUCATION CRISIS: GIVING POWER BACK TO PARENTS

Introduction

South African education is in crisis. Children attending South African schools fare poorly on almost every metric, and are ill-prepared for the world after school. More tragically, those who suffer the most from poor schooling are disproportionately black children.

If we fail to fix our schooling system, the problems we face today – many of which seem insurmountable – will seem even more difficult to beat. Looking at the scale of the problem, many may simply give up in despair, but there is hope.

Parents need to be given greater choice in, and greater control over, where they send their children. The IRR has developed a detailed policy proposal which will give parents the power to decide on the direction of their children’s schooling. More parental involvement in the management of schools will result in better outcomes and restore hope for many who have lost it. It will not be an easy task, but it is within our reach.

The South African education crisis

South African education is in crisis. Despite a vast expansion of the number of people in education today, it is an open question whether the education they are receiving is of a decent standard.

If we fail to fix our schooling system, the problems we face today – many of which seem insurmountable – will seem even more difficult to beat.

Most children entering Grade One in any given year are unlikely to matriculate, and an even smaller proportion will complete their 12 years of schooling with a good mark in mathematics.

In 2015, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) released a report ranking the education systems of 76 countries from around the world. The rankings were determined by examining how well students did in maths and science tests. South Africa performed dismally – of the 76 countries studied, the OECD said that the country had the 75th worst education system. The only country that performed worse was Ghana. Singapore was ranked as the country with the best education system in the world. The others in the top five were also Asian countries: Hong Kong, South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan, rounding out the top five. The only other African countries in the rankings were Morocco, Tunisia, and Botswana, which were ranked 73rd, 64th, and 70th respectively.¹

All is not lost, however. As the OECD’s survey points out, Singapore’s education system is now considered the best of those countries ranked, yet it had high levels of illiteracy in the 1960s. With political will and hard work, it is possible to create strong education systems. Improving education also has major

economic benefits. The OECD estimated that if all South African 15-year olds received a minimum level of education, the country's gross domestic product (GDP) would be 26 times larger than if education levels remained static.²

Comparing us only against our peers in southern and eastern Africa, the picture is slightly better, but not without cause for concern. South Africa is a member of the Southern and Eastern African Consortium for Monitoring and Educational Quality (SACMEQ). The organisation is made up of sixteen African education ministries, which work together to monitor and evaluate levels and standards of education in their countries.

The fourth SACMEQ report – conducted in 2013 – examined the achievement of learners in reading and maths. South Africa showed improvements in both these disciplines. In reading, South Africa improved from 9th to 8th, while the country's ranking in mathematics went from 9th to 6th.³ The average South African learner's score in 2013 was also higher or equal to the SACMEQ average score.

However, two red flags should concern anyone who cares about South African education or about their children's future in the country's education system.

First, the scores of teachers declined markedly. South African teachers first took part in SACMEQ in 2007. In that year, nearly 80% of teachers had 'critical reading' skills, compared to 32.9% in 2013. The average maths score achieved by teachers also dropped, though not as significantly.⁴

The OECD estimated that if all South African 15-year olds received a minimum level of education, the country's gross domestic product (GDP) would be 26 times larger than if education levels remained static.

Serious questions were also raised about the methodology around the SACMEQ tests. Nic Spaull, an education researcher, questioned the large gains in South Africa's scores in the SACMEQ tests, especially between 2007 and 2013. He also queried how the scores of teachers could drop, while the scores of learners went up.⁵

South Africa has also performed poorly in other international rankings. In the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), grade four and grade eight learners are tested on how proficient they are in maths and science. Although most other countries test their grade four learners, South Africa tests its grade five learners, which makes the country's dismal performance in this ranking even more concerning. 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.⁶

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 Arabia.⁷

South Africa's performance in science was worse – once more, with the country's grade nines rather than grade eights taking part: of the 39 countries that participated in the 2015 TIMSS, South Africa came stone last.⁸

There are major insights from the TIMSS tests. The first is that South Africa – despite the fairly dismal test scores – has been the fastest improving country, showing the largest improvement in average test scores⁹ This is heartening, but also shows how poorly previous cohorts of learners have performed.

The second is that there are fairly big differences in how South African learners perform, depending on which province they reside in, and whether they attend a no-fee state school, a fee-paying state school, or an independent school. For example, looking at the TIMMS mathematics score, the two best-performing provinces were the Western Cape and Gauteng, while the two poorest-performing provinces were North West and the Eastern Cape.¹⁰ It is no surprise that Gauteng and the Western Cape are the country's two richest provinces (in terms of GDP per capita), while the Eastern Cape is the poorest.¹¹

The score of learners attending an independent school for maths was 13% better than those in fee-paying public schools and nearly 40% better than those in non-fee state schools. Learners at fee-paying state schools also had scores nearly 25% better than those attending schools with no fees.¹²

Unsurprisingly, learners from poorer backgrounds also fared worse than their better-off counterparts. Learners with parents who had some post-schooling education had maths scores 11% higher than those whose parents had completed secondary schooling only, and 17% better than those whose parents had only some level of primary school education. The trends were similar with regard to science.¹³

Learners did better if they lived in households with running water and flush toilets. Learners also did better if they did not experience regular bullying, and if they spoke the language that the test was given in, at home.¹⁴

Learners did better if they lived in households with running water and flush toilets.

The organisation which conducts the TIMMS tests – the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement – administers similar tests to examine how well children are doing in terms of reading and literacy. These tests – officially called the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) – reveal that South African learners are behind their international counterparts in terms of literacy, too. Of the 50 countries that participated in the tests, South African learners performed the worst on their reading ability.¹⁵ Some 78% of South African grade four learners could not reach the minimum reading benchmark, compared to 4% internationally.¹⁶ Effectively, nearly 80% of South African learners in grade four cannot read.

Broken down provincially, only three provinces performed better than the national average. In the Western Cape, 55% of learners did not meet the benchmark (could not read for meaning), compared to 68.5% in Gauteng, and 73.4% in the Free State.¹⁷ As noted above, the Western Cape and Gauteng are the country's two richest provinces, with the Free State having the third highest per capita income.¹⁸ A whopping 91% of learners in Limpopo could not read for meaning in 2016.¹⁹

As with the TIMMS research, there are some issues that should be flagged and which are cause for concern. Girls performed far better on the test than boys – it is estimated that girls' reading ability is as much as a full year ahead of that of boys.²⁰

School infrastructure played a role in how well learners performed. Learners in schools with a library scored – on average – 16% higher than those in schools with no library. Worryingly, over 60% of South African schools do not have libraries.²¹ Learners from affluent backgrounds also did much better than those from less affluent ones. Pupils from an affluent background had scores nearly 40% higher than those who could be classified as economically disadvantaged, or neither disadvantaged nor affluent.²²

The importance of reading and having educational resources at home was evident from the differences in how well learners performed. Learners with parents who enjoyed reading had average scores of 17% higher than learners whose parents did not like reading. Learners with access to educational resources at home – such as books or the internet, and whose parents were themselves highly educated – were the only sub-group who managed a reading level which, on average, matched the international norm. The PIRLS study also underlined how important early childhood development (ECD) is. Learners who had attended a preschool or an ECD centre had average scores seven percent higher than those who had not.

The lack of reading skills among learners should worry us all. As Jonathan Jansen, leading educationist and president of the IRR, notes, reading is often a proxy for other areas of educational attainment. He writes: ‘A child who can read well in a language class can also understand texts in a science or economics class. A child who can understand what she reads is able to make connections between real and abstract things, something essential for advanced learning. A child with reading competency is more confident in her overall intellectual abilities.’ As Prof Jansen warns, when a vast majority of children in grade four cannot read, this hampers them in later education, which ultimately has dire consequences for society.²³

Total expenditure on education increased only by the rate of inflation between 2010 and 2016 meaning that more resources were going to salaries rather than to other resources, such as school infrastructure, books, and other learning materials.

Other research by Nic Spaull found that spending on South African learners was also on the decline. Between 2010 and 2017, the amount of money spent per learner per year declined by eight percent. In 2010, the amount of money spent per learner per year was R17 822 (in 2017 rands), but in 2017 this had fallen to R16 435. This amount is declining further, with the 2019 spend on learners expected to be only R15 963 (again, in 2017 rands). This will be a decline of ten percent in real terms on per-learner spending, for the second decade of this century.²⁴

Dr Spaull identified two reasons for this decline. The first is that teachers have enjoyed average wage increases of above inflation. Between 2010 and 2016, teachers’ salaries went up by 57%, while inflation for that period was 38%. However, total expenditure on education increased only by the rate of inflation for that period (about seven percent a year), meaning that more resources were going to salaries rather than to other resources, such as school infrastructure, books, and other learning materials.²⁵

The other reason identified by Dr Spaull for this decline in per capita spend on pupils is an increase in the number of births, especially between 2003 and 2008 (with a particularly high number of births between 2003 and 2005). This spike in the birth rate led to a jump in the number of school enrolments for the corresponding year in which these birth cohorts entered school. For example, in 2016 there were about 670 000 more learners in schools than in 2010. This increase was also partly because of higher retention rates in schools. This jump in the number of school enrolments ‘means larger classes, fewer books and fewer teachers per child’.²⁶ The spike in the birth rate is probably attributable, according to Dr Spaull, to the roll-out of antiretroviral drugs.

There are stark differences within our schools. The Department of Basic Education (DBE) divides South African schools into five quintiles, mainly to determine the level of school subsidy that a particu-

lar school is entitled to. Schools in quintile one are the poorest schools, while the 20% of schools that are the most well-off are in quintile five.

The vast majority of passes above 80% for mathematics are in quintile five schools. How well one does in mathematics is often a good indicator of whether one will enter the middle classes, and is a possible predictor of university performance. In 2016, less than one percent of learners writing maths in quintile one schools managed a mark of above 80%, while more than three-quarters could only manage a mark of 40% or lower. Unsurprisingly, the better-off quintiles had a higher proportion of learners managing 80% or above for maths, although the proportions were still low. For example, about 1.5% of learners in quintile three schools scored above 80% for mathematics, and three percent of those in quintile four schools managed this mark. Nearly ten percent (9.7%) of those in the richest schools – quintile five – managed to achieve above 80% for maths in 2016.

Attending a quintile five school is no guarantee of achieving a good maths pass, however – more than a third of learners attending quintile five schools in 2016 still managed only 40% or lower for maths. Nevertheless, the vast majority of learners achieving more than 80% in maths attended a quintile five school in 2016. Of the 265 000 learners who wrote maths in 2016, just over 8 000 managed to score 80% or higher, some 53% of them having attended a quintile five school. Only 6.5% of learners managing a distinction had attended a quintile one school.²⁷

One of the greatest tragedies in the crisis in government schools is that it is black children who suffer disproportionately from poor educational outcomes.

Only about seven percent of matric candidates will pass maths with a mark of more than 70%. If we consider that about 50% of children entering grade one do not even make it to matric, these figures become even starker – only about three out of every hundred children entering grade one will leave matric with a maths mark of above 70%.²⁸

The findings from the TIMMS tests show something similar. The gap in average test scores between the top 20% of schools in South Africa and the other 80% is one of the biggest in all the countries measured.²⁹

And one of the greatest tragedies in the crisis in government schools is that it is black children who suffer disproportionately from poor educational outcomes, which is a stumbling block to transformation and economic growth. The outcomes of black learners are poorer compared to their coloured, Indian, and white counterparts. For example, in 2016 the proportion of black learners who passed maths with 60% or more was 9%. By contrast, the proportion of whites passing with more than 60% was 52% (the proportions for coloured and Indian pupils were 20% and 40% respectively). In maths literacy, the figures are even starker – only 8% of black learners passed with a mark of above 60%, compared 20% of coloured learners, 44% of Indians, and 73% of white learners. Figures for other subjects show similar trends.³⁰

As noted earlier, quintile one schools have the worst educational outcomes and these are the schools which the majority of black children attend. According to data from the National Income Dynamics Survey (NIDS), nearly 40% of black learners attended a quintile one school, with only nine percent attending a quintile five school. By contrast, the proportion of white learners attending a quintile five school

was over 90%, with negligible proportions attending schools in the other quintiles.³¹ It is clear that black children are the ones who suffer the most from poor schooling that is provided by the government.

Coupled with the high dropout rate, our schools do little to prepare learners for the later stages of their educational life. In primary school, the proportion of learners that has to repeat a year is fairly low – in 2015 less than ten percent of learners in grades one to seven were repeating their particular grade. The rate jumps in high school, however. In 2015, some 12% of grade eights were repeating their grade. By grade ten, fully a fifth of learners were repeaters. The number of learners repeating was lower in grade 12 (just under eight percent), but this is probably a result of those who were unlikely to pass matric having been encouraged to leave school or begin attending other educational institutions.

Even those who manage to pass matric and pass well enough to enter university often struggle at the next level of their education career. In 2017, the number of people writing matric was just over 530 000, of whom three-quarters passed and nearly 30% passed well enough to be admitted to study a bachelor's degree at university. However, the proportion of learners who passed and those who gained a bachelor's pass has increased significantly since 2008, which raises questions about the standard of matric. In 2008, the matric pass rate was just over 60%, while only a fifth of matric learners did well enough to enter university.³² A 20% increase in the actual numbers of learners passing and a more than 40% increase in the numbers passing well enough to go to university suggests two things – either our education system has shown a strong improvement over the past ten years or standards are falling. Evidence from our universities would suggest the latter.

A 20% increase in the actual numbers of learners passing and a more than 40% increase in the numbers passing well enough to go to university suggests two things – either our education system has shown a strong improvement over the past ten years or standards are falling.

Prof Jansen has also raised a red flag regarding poor university education. He argues that the low standards at school level have 'infiltrated' universities, a development, according to him, that was inevitable.³³ A student can now pass a subject if they only understand 30% of the work. In order to pass well enough to gain university entrance, a learner only needs to get above 50% in four of seven subjects. In the language of instruction, a learner needs only a 30% pass. Such low hurdles for entrance into tertiary education will inevitably result in a dropping of standards at university.³⁴ These standards are so low that, according to Prof Jansen, a study done at one university found that final year graduates in education were functionally illiterate.³⁵ More terrifying is that these are the people who will be future teachers. And if they cannot read, what hope is there for those they are supposed to teach?

Further evidence that our schools do not adequately prepare learners for university is the small proportion of university students who graduate in the allotted time for their degree.³⁶ For example, of students³⁷ who began their three-year degree in 2011, only 29% had graduated within the allotted three-year period, with about 42% dropping out.³⁸ Breaking the figures down by race, it is clear that black students do disproportionately worse. Black children are more likely to have attended schools with poor facilities, and, moreover, where radical teachers' trade unions do more to disrupt classes than to ensure children are being educated.

Only a quarter of black students had finished their three-year degree in the allotted time by 2013, with a similar proportion of coloured students finishing their degree in the allotted three years. Some 27% of Indian students finished their degree within three years. By contrast, the proportion of white students

completing their degree in the allotted three years was 43%. Over half of black and coloured students had finished their degree within five years, some 59% of Indian students, and nearly two-thirds of white students.

The extra years spent in tertiary education have a number of knock-on effects. It increases overcrowding at universities, increases the debt of those students who are funded by student loans, and prolongs the delay before these students are earning an income and gaining experience in their chosen career. Many students who enter university are capable of passing, whether within the allotted time or with additional time and support. However, many of those entering our universities are simply not equipped for the intellectual rigours of university life, and this is often because of the poor standard of primary and secondary education they received.

What should concern us is that proportionately more money is being diverted to higher education than to primary and secondary education. A learner who receives a poor foundation at the primary level will always struggle to catch up. As Dr Spaul notes, only five percent of the poorest 70% of South Africans will enter university, and focusing on higher education rather than primary education is incorrect. According to Dr Spaul, it is ‘an extremely short-sighted policy to continue on the current trajectory of declining per-pupil public expenditure on basic education and rising per-pupil public spending on higher education’.³⁹

Many of those entering our universities are simply not equipped for the intellectual rigours of university life, and this is often because of the poor standard of primary and secondary education they received.

Why are our schools failing?

It is clear that South African schools are failing to adequately educate our children. Our grade fours are barely able to read, and most people drop out before they even reach the final year of school. Even if a child does make it to the final year of school, they will be unlikely to pass well enough to go to university, and be very unlikely to have got marks good enough to equip themselves for a successful university and working career. At the same time, it is black learners who are most likely to suffer from poor educational outcomes.

Part of the reason for these failures is militant trade unions, which the government is either unable or unwilling to rein in. The South African Democratic Teachers’ Union (SADTU) has, instead of protecting the rights of teachers, infringed the rights of learners in the country. Even minister of basic education Angie Motshekga has criticised SADTU, saying that the union (which is an ally of the ANC through its membership of the Congress of South African Trade Unions) caused more problems than it solved in some parts of the country.⁴⁰ She also bemoaned the union’s opposition to measures to improve education, its antagonistic approach, illegal strikes, and its use of policy matters as ‘bargaining chips’ to get its way.⁴¹

Research conducted by a task team appointed by the Department of Basic Education (DBE) found that SADTU had effectively ‘captured’ the schooling system in six provinces (the Free State, the Northern Cape, and Western Cape being the exceptions). The union was not only selling posts and manipulating appointments, and the manipulation of appointments was not only around the appointment of teachers and principals, but also of district managers. The DBE task team did not hold SADTU solely to blame, however. Writing in the *Mail & Guardian*, a member of the DBE task team, Michael Gardiner, said that the department had to carry some of the blame. He said that the department’s ‘weakness and

passivity’ had led to SADTU becoming as powerful as it was.⁴² This was partly because of the ANC’s policy of cadre deployment since the 1990s, which often put someone’s ideological purity above their ability to do a particular job. Gardiner writes: ‘25 years of government cadre deployment, which Sadtu is openly determined to continue, appears to have degenerated into patronage or else a means of capturing parts of the education system.’⁴³

Yet, despite the poor outcomes at schools and the insidious influence of SADTU, there are moves to take power away from school governing bodies (SGBs). The Draft Basic Education Amendments Bill seeks to take away the power that SGBs have to select and appoint senior teachers, such as principals. SGBs will only be able to select and appoint junior posts. SGBs will also no longer have control over a school’s admission policy, with this power lying with the Head of Department.⁴⁴ According to Mr Gardiner, a number of unions (not just SADTU) argue that problems around the appointment of educators are because of SGBs. Indeed, the only union that did not identify SGBs as a problem in appointments was the *Suid Afrikaanse Onderwysunie*. Mr Gardiner cautions against tampering with the powers of SGBs, arguing that they should be assisted to meet their potential, and that more should be done to develop them, to ensure those serving on them are familiar with ‘professional aspects of posts or with the intricacies of school management’.⁴⁵

The issue of language is used as a political football. Schools use it as a means to remain exclusive, while the government uses it as a rod to beat those it disapproves of.

The selling of posts by SADTU officials who have hijacked provincial education departments is not the only example of corruption in our schools. According to Corruption Watch, nearly 1 500 different instances of corruption were reported to them. Some 29% of such instances were linked to theft of funds, with a quarter of reports citing corruption around employment. Financial mismanagement was identified in 28% of the cases, with corruption around procurement accounting for 14% of the reports to the NGO. In the majority of cases, principals, or principals with the help of others, were fingered as the culprits.⁴⁶

In a country with as contested a history as South Africa’s, there will often be culture clashes, and this has also been the case in our schools. Although there is a right to receive education in the language of choice, this is tempered by restrictions on resources. A number of Afrikaans-medium schools have used the issue of language to restrict access to (particularly black) children, which is unacceptable. When a school is capable of taking additional children, this should happen, and a school should become dual-medium if necessary. Many formerly whites-only schools were dual medium during apartheid, and there is no reason why these schools cannot be common again today. However, it is clear that often the issue of language is used as a political football. Schools use it as a means to remain exclusive, while the government uses it as a rod to beat those it disapproves of.

The case of Panyaza Lesufi, the MEC for education in Gauteng, and Höerskool Overvaal in Vereeniging, is one such example. At the beginning of the year, 55 grade 8 children who wished to be taught in English wanted to attend Overvaal, an Afrikaans-medium school. The school said that it did not have the capacity for the children nor teachers to teach them in their chosen language, and, after the department had demanded that space be found for the 55, the matter ended up in court. The court ruled in favour of the school, saying that the department had tried to ‘force [the school] in an arbitrary fashion on very

short notice to convert to a double medium institution when it is not practically possible to do so'. Mr Lesufi has said that he will take the matter as far as the Constitutional Court. Subsequently, it emerged that Mr Lesufi and the provincial education department had bullied two English-medium schools in the area to claim that they were at capacity, when they were not, forcing the 55 children to try to get into Overvaal.⁴⁷ The principals of the two schools were accused of being racist and threatened with dismissal if they did not say that their schools were full.⁴⁸

The Federation of Governing Bodies of South African Schools (Fedsas) also warned that Afrikaans was under threat in Gauteng. The online application system, whereby parents apply online for the school of their choice, no longer gave parents an option of choosing a language of instruction. Jaco Deacon, the deputy chief executive of the organisation, said that this was an attempt by Mr Lesufi to change all Afrikaans-medium schools in Gauteng to English-medium ones. He said that the proportion of Afrikaans schools in the province was already low, with only six percent teaching exclusively in the language.⁴⁹

The issue of language should not be used to exclude people from receiving an education, but it seems that there is an agenda against Afrikaans schools in the province. People should be allowed to choose the language of instruction for their children, as long as it is not done solely to exclude people of other races and cultural backgrounds. The right to one's language and cultural identity is enshrined in the Constitution and must be protected – and giving people more school choice is one way of doing this.

In Kenya it was found that half of children in Nairobi attended a fee-paying private school even though free state schooling was available.

What is the solution?

Parents need more choice, both in where they send their children and in how their schools are run.

Although private schools are often perceived as being bastions of privilege, this is not always the case. Evidence from around the world shows that people of little means or earning low incomes are prepared to make major sacrifices to send their children to schools which provide a good education. Parents send their children to fee-paying schools even if the option exists of a school with no fees.

Why is this? It is because in many parts of the world private schools perform better than state schools. They are often run better, with smaller class sizes and teachers who teach for longer and are absent less.

For example, in Kenya it was found that half of children in Nairobi attended a fee-paying private school even though free state schooling was available. Some have suggested that this is simply because there are not enough public school spaces available to accommodate all children, especially in high-density slums such as Kibera. However, work done by American researchers found that parents were choosing to send their children to private schools despite the high financial costs. It was estimated that having one child in a low-cost private school in Nairobi cost about 12% of the income of the primary earner. Considering that respondents in the survey had an average of three children, choosing a low-fee private school over a free state school is unlikely to be a decision such parents take lightly. Low-fee private schools in Nairobi were perceived as being of higher quality than state schools, as well as having harder-working teachers. The only benefit that state schools had over private schools was infrastructure and learning materials.⁵⁰ It is illuminating that people – in general – still chose private schools over state schools, showing the importance of teachers.

Research done in Lagos State in Nigeria and in poor areas around Accra in Ghana also found that the

majority of poor people send their kids to fee-paying independent schools. These schools also produced better results than government schools.⁵¹

Parents will choose quality for their children, whether it is provided by private or state schools. In Rwanda, private schools are under threat – not because of government interventions or crackdowns, but simply because so many children attend state rather than private schools. The Rwandan government worked to expand and improve infrastructure and the quality of teaching, as well as abolish school fees and introduce feeding schemes, which has seen the number of Rwandan children in private schools dwindle.⁵² However, as we have seen, getting rid of fees is not enough; state schooling has to be of a high quality for parents to choose government schools over private schools.

Private schools in South Africa have seen rapid growth, further evidence that people are looking for quality education for their children. For example, in 2000, about 11.6 million people enrolled in government schools in South Africa. Sixteen years later this had grown to 12.3 million, an increase of six percent. By contrast, the number of people enrolled in independent schools had jumped by 130%. Although the number of children attending independent schools was off a smaller base, this is still a significant increase. In 2000, the number of people in independent schools was 256 000, rising to 590 000 in 2016. There was a similarly large increase in the number of independent schools over that period, while the number of state schools declined. In 2000, there were almost 27 000 state schools in South Africa, declining by 12% to just under 24 000 in 2016. The Free State experienced the biggest decline, with the number of state schools in that province dropping by over 50% over the sixteen-year period. Independent schools told a different story. Between 2000 and 2016, the number of schools independent from government control rose from 971 to 1 855, a 91% increase. Not one province saw a decline in the number of independent schools, with the number in the Eastern Cape rising by a whopping 431%.⁵³

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Many in South Africa would argue that this is in all likelihood a symptom of white flight, with whites fleeing government schools and building more ‘Etons-on-the-Veld’, and continuing to exclude others. However, nothing could be further from the truth. Much of the growth in private schools is because of the growth in low-fee private schools, as parents vote with their feet.

In 2014, the Independent Schools Association of Southern Africa had 730 member schools, and nearly three-quarters of pupils in these schools were black. Over 120 member schools charged less than R15 000 a year and about 60 less than R10 500 – fairly affordable fees and cheaper than some former Model C schools.⁵⁴ Low-fee private schools range from schools run by private companies, such as Curro, or founded by entrepreneurs, such as Spark Schools. The Centre for Development and Enterprise also did work on low-fee private schools in poorer areas in South Africa. Six areas were studied, each where more than 50% of the population lived in poverty, yet about 30% of the schools were independent.⁵⁵

It is clear, people want choice for their children.

Getting bureaucrats out and communities involved in the governing of schools will lead to better outcomes.

How can this be done? The IRR suggests a voucher system, which would effectively be a universal bursary system, while at the same time getting bureaucrats out, and communities and parents in, to con-

trol schools. Some state schools could be sold to community groups, churches, non-profit organisations, and private education providers for a nominal amount (say R1), similar to the charter or contract school system used abroad. These schools would then be responsible for the payment of salaries and upkeep of the school. Parents would be given a voucher for each child, which they could use towards education, whether at an independent school, an ordinary state school, a Model C school, or a school run by entrepreneurs. Education spending would be redirected to pupils, to around the value of R16 000 per year (more or less what per capita spend on learners is today). This would give parents far more choice than they have today, especially those on lower incomes. Parents could shop around for the best education for their children. Poor-performing schools would soon experience an exodus of pupils. Principals and teachers at these schools would soon realise that unless their offering was improved they would be jobless. If schools had to shut down because of a lack of pupils, their facilities could be auctioned off to Curro, or Spark, or other private-schooling organisations. These buildings would then be refurbished and new schools opened. Parents will have more choice and a more diverse school system will have been created, with parents having a choice between independent schools, state schools, former Model C schools, and charter schools.

This will also be a way of breaking the power of teachers' unions such as SADTU – schooling would once again focus on what is best for the child, rather than what is best for the teacher. We estimate that these vouchers would be enough to provide high-quality schooling to all children. In the case of schools charging higher fees, parents could top up the difference through their vouchers. Parents will also be able to choose the ethos, curriculum, and language policy of their school.

Parents will have more choice and a more diverse school system will have been created, with parents having a choice between independent schools, state schools, former Model C schools, and charter schools.

The charter school system has worked well in other countries, and evidence from the United States shows that children in these schools perform better than children in other schools, including children from poorer backgrounds. Vouchers are an idea that is now over a century old, and work well in both the developed and developing world.

The IRR has also developed a charter for parents, which lays out the rights and responsibilities that parents have when it comes to making decisions about a child's education. This Charter can be downloaded from the IRR website, where parents can also pledge their support for greater parental involvement in schools.

Conclusion

South African education is in crisis. Many of our schools have poor facilities, and fail to prepare children for life at university or in the workplace. Tragically, those who suffer the most from poor outcomes are black children. This has major implications for transformation and solving issues such as unemployment and poverty in South Africa. As long as the country is burdened with poor educational outcomes, these problems will remain with us for years to come, with dire consequences for the future of South Africa.

The IRR has proposed a solution – greater parental control over schooling. Giving parents greater control over the school their children attend, and how that school operates, will result in better outcomes. It is likely that if parents can choose the ethos and language policy, and have a say in the appointments of teachers and principals, schooling outcomes will be improved. In addition, introducing a voucher

system will also result in schools having to improve – state schools will no longer be able simply to rely on a captive market.

Ensuring that our schools provide excellent education is one of the core building blocks in making South Africa a successful society. Without good schools, producing young people ready for university and the world of work, the problems we currently face will remain intractable. Giving parents more choice and freedom when it comes to schooling will be an important first step in facing contemporary problems, as well as putting the horrific legacy of apartheid behind us.

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