



South African Institute of Race Relations NPC

SYNOPSIS

Submission to the Department of Basic Education,

Draft New History Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS)

19 April 2026

Overview

This synopsis accompanies the IRR’s full submission on the Draft New History Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS) (“the draft curriculum”), published for public comment on 20 March 2026 by the Department of Basic Education (“the department”).

The IRR’s core submission is that the draft curriculum should be withdrawn and rewritten. The draft curriculum, in its current form, omits vital developments in Africa and elsewhere, provides a skewed and biased assessment of the political transition in South Africa, and reflects an anti-Western and anti-capitalist ideology. If adopted in its current form, it will harm South Africa’s future pupils by misinforming them about important global, continental and local developments. It also risks dumbing down South Africa’s children, undermining their ability to compete globally, and provoking the kind of anti-democratic and anti-capitalist militancy that neither the country nor the government of national unity can afford. What follows summarises the main grounds for this conclusion.

Procedural deficiencies

The department has failed to comply with the Constitution’s requirements for public consultation, as set out in a host of Constitutional Court judgments. The department has also failed to comply with the National Policy Development Framework, approved by Cabinet in December 2020. That Framework requires early and full consultation with stakeholders, evidence-based analysis of relevant alternatives, and a willingness to adjust proposals in the light of public feedback. None of this has happened. Instead, the department has adopted the “tick-box approach” to public consultation that the Framework explicitly warns against.

The 30-day comment period is also inadequate given the complexity and reach of the proposed changes to the curriculum, which span various documents. The proposed changes could also

affect all South African pupils if history is in future made a compulsory subject in the Further Education and Training (“FET”) phase, comprising Grades 10 to 12.

The IRR has objected to the shortness of the comment period. It has also found it impossible to do more than comment briefly on the proposed changes for Grades 10 to 12, even though important changes are also to be made for other grades as well.

A strong but skewed focus on Africa

The draft curriculum’s increased focus on Africa is welcome. Pre-colonial African kingdoms such as Mali and Great Zimbabwe, and the social history of African societies before the colonial encounter, are stories worth telling. South African pupils should learn them.

Unfortunately, however, the draft curriculum leaves out vital developments which must be included for adequate understanding. These include, in particular, the role of Africans in enslaving other Africans over many thousands of years. Some estimates put the number of Africans enslaved across the continent at close to 50 million over 5,000 years. In these circumstances, the draft curriculum’s focus on the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade alone is not only inadequate but also profoundly misleading.

The story of how Britain freed all slaves across its empire in 1834 must also be included. So too must the enormous effort that Britain made to end the slave trade in Africa and most other parts of the world. This endeavour may have cost British taxpayers as much as 1.7% of GDP a year over many decades. (For context, the United Kingdom now spends some 2% of GDP on defence.)

The omission of major global developments

Under the current curriculum, Grade 11 covers the Russian Revolution, the rise of Nazi Germany, the Great Depression, and the ideological contest between capitalism, communism, and fascism that defined the twentieth century. Grade 12 covers the post-war world order, including the Cold War as a global phenomenon. Under the proposed draft curriculum, by contrast, all of this is gone. The entire FET phase becomes a study of pre-colonial African civilisations, European colonisation of Africa, the liberation struggle, and the transition to democracy.

These omissions are damaging. For example, the French Revolution gave the world the language of rights and equality that the ANC itself drew on in 1994, yet it appears nowhere in the proposed FET curriculum as a standalone subject.

The exclusion of Communism in Russia is disturbing too. If pupils are to have a balanced understanding of vital developments in the 20th century, they must be given an accurate overview of the failures of central planning in the Soviet Union and the extent of the repression it helped unleash. Pupils should also be informed of the mass deaths that occurred under 20th-century totalitarian systems, including Stalin’s purges and Pol Pot’s killing fields. The deaths of some 94 million people under communist rule in Russia and elsewhere is too important to be ignored, as the draft curriculum proposes to do.

The omission of major developments in South Africa too

The draft curriculum frequently implies that the African National Congress (ANC) was solely responsible for ending apartheid. That is incorrect. Vital contributions were also made by liberals, the Black Consciousness movement, Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi and Inkatha, and the tens of thousands of ordinary black South Africans who made key apartheid laws “unworkable” and so compelled their repeal.

As regards *the liberal contribution*, for example, liberals of all races played a vital role delegitimising apartheid laws and helping to bring about their repeal. They also succeeded in communicating liberal ideas and popularising them among all South Africans. They were so successful in doing so (writes a former IRR CEO, John Kane-Berman) that there was “huge support for liberal principles” right across the country by the time that constitutional negotiations began in February 1990.

This explains why liberal ideas permeate South Africa’s Constitution. Examples include the Constitution’s founding value of non-racialism; its emphasis on the supremacy of the rule of law; its checks and balances on executive power; its guarantees of fundamental freedoms in its Bill of Rights; its respect for judicial and prosecutorial independence; and its partial devolution of powers to lower tiers of government. Unfortunately, however, the ANC has since undermined many of these liberal principles: often by deploying its loyal cadres to institutions supposed to be independent of the ruling party’s control.

Inkatha and its founder, Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi succeeded in destroying the “grand apartheid” strategy that was aimed at hiving all black South Africans off into “independent” homelands while simultaneously depriving them of their South African citizenship – and of any claim to political rights in the common area. The refusal of Inkatha and Buthelezi to accept a spurious independence for the KwaZulu homeland meant that 7 million isi-Zulu speakers would always outnumber 5 million whites. This also meant that black South African citizens would have to be given political rights at the national level and within the common area – as the National Party government was compelled to admit by August 1985.

A skewed portrayal of the political transition

Here, a persistent pro-ANC bias abounds, which skews the draft curriculum’s account of many key developments.

As regards Angola and Namibia, the draft curriculum omits the crucial Lomba River battle in August 1987, in which the MPLA, and its supporting Soviet and Cuban forces, were roundly defeated. This was the primary factor prompting negotiations, the withdrawal of 50,000 Cuban troops from Angola, and independence for Namibia in 1989.

As regards the ANC’s “armed struggle,” this was in fact a multi-faceted people’s war, which the ANC continued to wage from 1984 to 1994: throughout the negotiations period. The ANC conducted its people’s war in keeping with the formula for victory in which it had been instructed by General Võ Nguyễn Giáp in Vietnam in 1978. The main purpose of the people’s war was to weaken or destroy the ANC’s black rivals – especially Inkatha, with its roughly 2

million members in 1990 – and so secure the ANC’s hegemony over post-apartheid South Africa. These crucial developments are all ignored.

As for **propaganda** during the transition, the draft curriculum ignores the fact that this came mainly from the ANC and its many allies and was primarily reflected in the “third-force” theory of the violence. The third-force theory was a vital part of ANC propaganda, especially in the period from 1990 to 1994, when political killings went up three-fold. This propaganda had two main purposes. The first aim was to divert public attention from the 13,000 armed and trained Umkhonto we Sizwe (“MK”) fighters the ANC had brought back into South Africa by 1991 under the cover of the peace process. The second was to stigmatise the ANC’s political rivals and especially Inkatha.

These 13,000 MK fighters – whom the ANC refused to disarm or disband – clearly had both the means and the motive to attack Inkatha (now renamed the Inkatha Freedom Party or IFP) and its roughly 2 million members in KwaZulu/Natal and on the Reef. However, the ANC successfully deflected public attention from MK’s possible culpability by blaming mounting political violence on a sinister “third force”. This “third force” was said to comprise the IFP and its allies in the South African Police (SAP), both of whom were supposedly working together to destabilise the ANC and derail the transition to majority rule.

The media and other commentators gave splash coverage to the “third-force” theory, while ignoring its two major weaknesses. First, the theory could not explain the killing of hundreds of IFP leaders and thousands of IFP supporters – many of whom were gunned down in premeditated ambushes. In addition, the theory could not explain the large number of police deaths (roughly 1,000 between 1990 and 1994) and police injuries (more than 1,700 in the first six months of 1993 alone). A third force that killed a small number of its own supporters to stir up hatred, provoke counterattack and try to derail the negotiations process might have some logic behind its actions. But a third force that killed or wounded thousands of its own supporters made no sense at all.

Second, though both the IFP and the police arguably had the means and the motive to attack and destabilise the ANC, they drew no benefit from the mounting political violence. On the contrary, every attack that could be dubbed a third-force one weakened State President FW de Klerk and undermined his credibility. Every attack of this kind also stigmatised Buthelezi as an apartheid “collaborator” and further isolated him from his supporters. There was thus no political advantage to the IFP or SAP in persisting with their alleged third-force attacks.

As regards the **negotiations process** in the early 1990s, the draft curriculum seems calculated to mislead. The negotiations process was deeply flawed because the ANC used the violence and propaganda of the people’s war to help it control the talks. It was the ANC’s effective domination that prevented any genuine deliberations on the best way forward and prompted the Inkatha Freedom Party and others to walk out. Moreover, though the ANC made some concessions, these compromises were insignificant and were soon abandoned.

As for the first **“democratic” (more accurately, the first all-race) election** in April 1994, this was so tainted by the people’s war – and the 1,000 political killings recorded between January and April 1994 – that it was neither free nor fair. In addition, the conduct of the election was so chaotic, largely because of interventions the ANC had insisted upon, that no accurate count could be computed in the end.

The **1996 Constitution** was also flawed, in that it further consolidated ANC hegemony by weakening important checks and balances on executive power that had been contained in the interim text. From April 1994, moreover, the ANC began deploying its loyal cadres to Parliament, the judiciary and most Chapter 9 institutions, thereby deepening its control over what it terms the “levers of power.”

As regards the **Truth and Reconciliation Commission (“the TRC”)**, the key issue to be covered in the draft curriculum is the TRC’s partisanship towards the ANC. For example, the TRC described the limited people’s war waged by the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC) as a breach of international humanitarian law because it had deliberately targeted civilians. By contrast, the TRC largely ignored the ANC’s people’s war, even though this was the primary factor in the killing of some 20,500 people in the period from 1984 to 1994. Most of the victims of the ANC’s people’s war were black civilians, who were hacked, stabbed and shot to death to help the organisation obtain hegemony over post-apartheid South Africa.

The TRC’s reports are deeply flawed in other ways too. Among other things, they often rely on unsubstantiated hearsay evidence; they contradict court judgments founded on tested and comprehensive evidence; and they show a persistent bias in favour of the ANC and against the IFP, in particular. Often, moreover, the TRC accepted as true evidence which was clearly false and should have been rejected. This includes the testimony of former Vlakplaas commander Dirk Coetzee. Coetzee claimed to have murdered Griffiths Mxenge in 1981, but he clearly had no knowledge of the wounds Mxenge had suffered (as described in an autopsy report) or of the stadium in which his body had been found. (Coetzee did not recognise the stadium from photographs taken at the time.

A new pedagogical approach

The draft curriculum also puts a new emphasis on “oral traditions as historical sources,” as well as “archaeological evidence.” This is supposed to help pupils to “engage critically with sources, interpretations and the construction of historical knowledge itself.” Critical engagement will largely be excluded, however, if the content of the draft curriculum remains as one-sided as now. In addition, success in this sphere will “depend heavily on teacher preparedness, resource availability, and assessment alignment.” Moreover, “the increased emphasis on enquiry, oral sources and interdisciplinary approaches could pose implementation challenges, particularly in under-resourced schools.”

Improved literacy and numeracy the most important needs

The government also needs to rethink its priorities. The most recent international reading study has found that about eight in ten South African Grade 4 children cannot read for meaning in any language. For those children, the question of which historical episodes appear in the matric syllabus is academic in the worst sense of the word. They will never sit for a matric history

exam. Instead, they will leave school without the basic literacy needed to engage with any text, let alone a contested historical one.

A country with a schooling system that is so defective should be modest about how much it can achieve through redesigning the history curriculum. The deeper and far more important issue is that most of our children are being denied the ability to read any textbooks at all. This is the key problem – and this is what must be fixed before anything else is done.

The way forward

Allowing a scant 30 days for public comment on draft curriculum statements containing over 300 pages of dense information is far too short a period. Most people cannot adequately engage with difficult material of this kind in such a truncated time.

Cutting the public consultation process short by imposing an inordinately short deadline creates the impression that the department wishes to avoid real public participation. Yet this is contrary to what the Constitution requires. Inevitably, it will also place the legitimacy of the new curriculum in question.

At the very least, the time allowed for consultation should be extended for another 30 days or, better still, until the end of May. This is essential to facilitate what the minister of basic education, Siviwe Gwarube now seems to support: the opportunity for “as many people as possible to indicate where they believe the draft should be strengthened, corrected, expanded, or refined.” However, this simply cannot be done before the period for comment closes on 19 April 2024.

Gwarube has also said that “our History curriculum should not exclude key events or perspectives on political grounds, nor should it impose any particular ideology on learners.” She is committed, she adds, to “ensuring that the curriculum equips learners to think critically about our past, so that they may form their own opinions,” she adds.

The current draft will not help fulfil these goals. At minimum, more time must thus be allowed for comment. Thereafter, the current draft curriculum must be fundamentally rewritten to provide a more comprehensive, objective, and balanced overview of our past. After all, as Gwarube says, “As South Africans we understand how complex our history is, and how important the study of it is for reconciliation and nation-building.” A new history curriculum must reflect that understanding, not undermine it.

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