



# SELBORNE PRIMARY SCHOOL

Good morning, Honourable Chairperson Nchabeleng, and members of the Select Committee. It is an absolute privilege to be here today and I thank you for the opportunity. I must admit that I am daunted at the prospect of speaking here today - for two reasons. The first reason is that I am speaking to members of parliament. The second reason is that when I looked at the list of those chosen to present, they all represent influential groups within the sphere of education. I am, however, representing a small school in East London and see myself as an everyday person. But perhaps that is the point. An opportunity to present to the Select Committee on behalf of the people, 'by someone who is **from** the people' as the expression goes.

Today, I am representing Selborne Primary SGB. A small, monastic boys school in East London in the beautiful Eastern Cape. We are a proudly South African school. I am presenting to you our thoughts on the BELA bill. Let me start by saying that it is definitely time to amend the Schools Act. This is long overdue. As an SGB, there are many parts of the amendments that we are in favour of.

I highlight the following:

- Clause 2 amending section 3 of the act with reference to making grade R compulsory.
  - As a side note, we are concerned about the funding of this but in essence we support the idea. The importance of formalising education for our youngest will no doubt have a positive impact on education in the country.
  - I also add that should grade R be made compulsory and the department is unable to provide facilities and teachers for many schools in our country, then parents would be guilty of breaking Section 3 of the act which criminalises non-attendance at school
- Clause 22 amending section 28 that deals with uniform and national measures regarding the election of members of the governing body
- Clause 36 amending section 59 of the act with reference to providing false information
  - This will greatly assist schools when parents provide false information regarding admissions

However, there are a several clauses that we are not comfortable with. These clauses include:

- Clause 4 regarding the amendment of section 5 with reference to the admissions policy
- Clause 5 regarding the amendment of section 6 with reference to the language policy of a school
- Clause 14 regarding the amendment of section 21 with reference to centralisation of procurement



- Clause 32 and 34 regarding the amendment of section 43 and 48 with reference to the submission of quarterly financial reports to the Department of Education

Selborne Primary SGB objects to each of these clauses on the basis of democracy and capacity.

In our country we have one of the best democracy's in the world. The theory of role players having a say in the running of the country is something to be proud of. This has influenced all spheres of life, including education. Schools have, since the South African Schools Act, allowed parents as role players to have a voice in the governance of their schools. By centralising power that was once in the hands of the SGB. This would, in effect, prohibit their democratic rights to play a role in the education and choice of education for their children.

South Africa continues to lead the world on democratic principles. In countries like the UK and others, where centralisation has previously been policy, the departments in those countries have been moving towards decentralisation of power. In research, they often quote the South African experience. It makes no sense as to why we would reduce what clearly has worked and has influenced many countries in the world to follow. In research published by Brian Caldwell in 2008, he suggested that decentralisation played a large role in establishing successful schools. He said that schools that allowed more say from SGB's were more efficient and effective. This was largely in line with international experience.

- The shift towards school autonomy has been largely beneficial in the UK, which is in line with international experience
- Each school contains a unique mix of students' needs, interests, aptitudes and aspirations, and those at the school level are best placed to determine the particular mix of resources available to achieve optimal outcomes
- Autonomous schools may be regarded as potentially more efficient and effective

Based on these comments alone, it should remain our democratic right to formulate the policies for our schools. The fact that we are required to submit this to the department for approval on its own is not problematic, however, the concept that the HOD of any province can sit in an office somewhere and make a decision on policies of a school is removed from reality. The HOD does not have an intimate understanding of the unique circumstances and needs of each school. This approach threatens to strip away the individual identity of schools like Selborne Primary, undermining the autonomy and local context that are crucial for effective educational governance.



The biggest point for us, as a school, is that we are a juristic person, as established in the SASA in section 15. As a school, over and above this fact, we each have our own identity and ethos. This is what attracts parents to join our school, to seek admission. Our parents form our community and they are a large part of who we are. By centralising these decisions, we risk a single person, or position, sitting somewhere far away making decisions about a school they know nothing about. This will ultimately destroy our schools.

These proposed amendments are believed to be aimed at pressuring schools to admit more students into already-capable schools, rather than the Department constructing additional schools to accommodate the surplus of learners. The fact is that this could create overcrowding in our school. This would infringe upon the rights of the learners already in the school. The school, and its parents, have a right to choose what they want or deem as quality for their children. They choose our school because of the quality education we offer and by allowing the HOD to determine admissions, this will infringe upon their rights. Further to this, whilst there are norms and standards, the HOD does not know all the necessary information about every school. (I know that it seems reasonable to assume that because schools complete paperwork with regards to information that perhaps the HOD will know the situation in that school. However, we submit the same information every year. This indicates that the department does not take note of the information despite having it at hand.) In my school, our classrooms are already full and cannot accommodate many more learners. Further to this, the school is in an urban centre in a suburb. We are locked in and there is no further room for physical growth. It would best serve our learners for admissions policies to remain under the jurisdiction of the SGB as they know the school and its exact situation. This is the democratic right of the school and its parents.

It is on similar principles that we object to the amendments to clause 5 with regards to the language policy. Our parents have chosen our school for its language. Amending this policy will influence the school and affect the rights of our parents. The amendment references the fact that the HOD may make suggestions based on the broader community in the district in which the school is situated. As an English medium school, we do not presently have the facilities such as classrooms to add any additional mediums of instruction. We do not have the human resources to add any additional mediums of instruction, or to change our current medium and neither do we have the resources to cope with that. We know that the department cannot currently accommodate these amendments. Presently, we are unable to fill our allocation of posts as provided for. The ECDoE will allow you only to fill a post when someone leaves the department and your post is critical. Some schools have been short of teachers for years. One school has 6 vacancies whilst another has 8. Personally, our SGB are carrying 2 posts presently. Perhaps the committee is unaware that last year the ECDoE did not pay us the funds we were due with regards to our tranche payments. Schools only received 66% of allocated funds with the



department retaining 34%. This proves that the Department will not have the funds available to make these changes at our school.

Based on this, the Selborne Primary SGB objects to the amendments of these clauses. It is our democratic right to govern the admissions policy of the school as well as the language of our choice for LOLT, as well as the parents' constitutional right to make decisions in the best interest of their child.

Each and every term, we are required to submit numerous documents to the Department of Education. This is over and above the requirements in the South African Schools Act, such as an academic report and a school improvement plan. At the end of 2023, our school had to submit 15 different reports and/or checklists to our local department. The amount of work that goes into each document is not simple. This does not include the schedules that need to be prepared. Academic meetings take place to discuss flagged learners and plans put into place to assist those learners. Over and above this, we have the normal everyday tasks that each of our schools require us to perform to effectively run the school. Adding to this would significantly increase the burden on the school and its resources. All schools, as governed in the SASA submit the AFS every year. This is a comprehensive report on the finances of each school. Asking schools to submit quarterly reports on its finances, would significantly burden the school and place unnecessary pressure on staff and already strained financial resources. As an SGB we also ask why does the Department need this information? Therefore, we do not endorse the proposal to amend sections 43 and 48 of the Schools Act.

The final clause that the SGB objects to is that of central procurement. In the Eastern Cape, the procurement of textbooks has already been centralised and we are not allowed to opt out. As an SGB, we object to this due to the fact that the department provides so little funds for a school like ours. The fact that we can possibly purchase one grade's worth of textbooks, and most of the time not for the whole grade, means that the SGB has to supplement textbooks orders. This means that the parents, through school fees, are required to purchase extra books. It creates an administrative nightmare for the school having to complete 2 orders and procurement systems, one through the department and the other through our own internal mechanisms. However, the far more practical objections are that the department hasn't got the capacity to deal with this. In 2021, our LTSM arrived on 28 January 2021 – for that year. That is after schools started.

Fortunately, as a school we have been permitted to opt out of stationery centralisation to date and we are grateful for this. Centralisation of this process will remove our rights to procure our own stationery at the quality that our parents have come to expect. I can share with the committee that in our circuit, even the quintile 1, 2 and 3 schools complain about the quality of the products that they have received. They too have asked for the option of opting out as the quality is not good enough.



Quality is better than quantity. Further to that, asking a grade 1 learner to write his name on an LTSM register as proof that he has received 1 ruler, 1 pencil and a sharpener from the department is difficult to understand.

With regards to the second point of our presentation, this falls under the broad category of capacity.

Again, the second part references the same clauses that have been objected to already. The Department of Basic Education in the Eastern Cape does not have the capacity to deal with its every day functions, let alone of these additional responsibilities.

I can provide the committee with numerous examples of where the department has failed to communicate with us timeously, or even communicated at all. A week ago, I asked the department where I had to submit concessions applications. The deadline was the 28 February and with the change to a CMC model in the Eastern Cape, we were informed that everything had to go to our CMC. I contacted my CMC to ask if I should submit the documentation to the CMC. To date I have not had a response. This is critical documentation that will grant our boys concessions to aid them with getting through tests and formal assessments at school. It will assist with their barriers to learning. However, no response. I took it upon myself to drive to the district office and still managed to submit, but the point is that the department has not yet responded to my query.

At the same time, I queried the documentation required for the termly submissions. Each term, in the EC we submit SGB functionality tools as well as SMT building blocks. Each term I complete the documents timeously and submit, only to be told that I have used the wrong documents. The Department is forever making subtle edits or changes to the documents and sending them out to us after they are due. Then we have to jump through hoops to be compliant despite the late arrival of the documents. This term, in an effort to prevent needless work by completing the wrong documents, I again contacted my department to ask for the most recent template so that I may complete the correct version. Time is running out. Again, I have had no reply.

On the 27 of February, at 18h53 at night, I received a memo from the department on WhatsApp. It informed me that at least one member of the SGB had to be present at training the next morning at 09h00. This again demonstrates that we do not have the capacity to handle our core day to day tasks, let alone any of the big decisions. My SGB consists of attorneys, chartered accountants, heads of businesses, quantity surveyors etc. They cannot attend training at such late notice!

On Monday 4 March, at 08h18 I received a message about a QMS meeting the next day. The WhatsApp read that this was a reminder about the meeting. However, we



never received the first notification so how can we get a reminder? Further to that, I am an electoral officer at another school. Clearly there is a clash in this regard of the requirement to be in two places at once.

On the 27 February, the Department sent a WhatsApp at 06h20 informing schools that we needed to complete a document by 10h00 that day if we wanted a Grade R teacher. Never mind that this was 6 weeks after school had already started. Those schools that are desperate would have to drop everything to complete a document that could be crucial for their school.

My final point with regards to the capacity of my province has to do with the current SGB elections. The Honourable Minister of Education declared the SGB election dates to be in the month of March this year. This was gazetted on 5 June 2023. A memo from our MEC for Education was only signed on the 12 February providing the Eastern Cape with regulations for this election. The memo reached schools on the 15 February 2024. In the regulations it stated that schools had to submit their mode of elections to the HOD, or their representative, with 30 days' notice. Impossible to comply if you look at the dates. This is expected in clause 11.2 of the Eastern Cape regulations. Further to that, the HOD had 14 days to respond to the submission. This clearly hasn't happened yet. In both the regulations, as well as SASA, it refers to 14 days notice to parents of the upcoming elections. If you do the maths, this is impossible. Fortunately, my school was able to provide notice to parents irrespective of the late arrival of the EC regulations.

There are plenty of examples like that every year. Where we are given information last minute. Further to that, we often do not receive replies to queries or emails.

One final suggestion that we have, is that the SASA allows for the HOD to remove the powers of an SGB that is underperforming. However, what if we do something completely different. What if we leave the status quo to remain with an added privilege of allowing parents and the community to play a greater role in the schools that they are part of. What if we allow the HOD to enhance the powers of SGB's in high performing schools. What if allow them to have more of a say in how their schools are run!

Honourable members, I end with a famous African Proverb that says, 'It takes a village to raise a child.' On behalf of our SGB, our village, we appeal to the committee to rather than remove the powers of the SGB, to provide a system to enhance the functions of high performing SGB's.

Honourable members, it has been a real privilege to address you on this platform today, and for my small school to play its part on the legislative process. We sincerely thank you for your time, and for the due consideration that you will give to



this amendment. We pray that democracy triumphs in the best interests of the school and the learners that we serve.