

FEDSAS submission to the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Basic Education

February 2010

Introduction

The Federation of Governing Bodies of South African Schools (FEDSAS) values the opportunity at the invitation of the Chairperson of the Portfolio Committee on Basic Education (PCBE) to bring certain difficulties and problem areas in school education to the committee's attention. It is after all only through open dialogue that we will be able to resolve the problems that are currently hampering our pursuit of quality education for all our children.

FEDSAS consulted its members as widely as possible on the issues that should be brought to the PCBE's attention, and received an overwhelming response. Each of the contributions we received raises serious problems, mostly indicating serious systemic failures attributable not to the system itself, but to those operating within it. For the sake of practicality, though, we have decided to address only the most serious generic issues.

Whom FEDSAS represents

As a voluntary association of school governing bodies (SGBs), as envisaged in the South African Schools Act (SASA), FEDSAS represents the SGBs of a cross section of primary, combined and secondary schools in South Africa. Its membership consists of single-medium Afrikaans and English schools, as well as dual-medium and parallel-medium schools. It is the largest and oldest of the existing governing body associations, with established structures and representation in all nine provinces.

The FEDSAS constitution reflects the association's vision as follows:

“Strength through Unity and Collaboration”

The vision of FEDSAS is the conservation and promotion of education of quality in public schools in the Republic of South Africa.

Its mission statement reads as follows:

The mission of FEDSAS is to do everything within its power to represent its members and their stakeholders in securing and promoting the highest possible standard of education for all children in our country in general, and to promote effective school governance to achieve the former in particular.

We are singularly and firmly committed to quality education for all the children of this country.

As a voluntary association, FEDSAS has at its disposal some of the top school education experts. However, as our only source of income is membership fees, which schools find increasingly difficult to afford due to financial constraints in their communities, we are limited in what we can achieve.

The factual situation

FEDSAS believes that the structure of the school education system in South Africa is one of the best and most progressive in the world, and we are proud of our contribution to the development of this system. However, sadly, the system as a whole is failing dismally.

The systemic failure should not mislead us into doubting all staff and learners' abilities – the performance of learners in FEDSAS member secondary schools reflects excellence and commitment. The following table indicates the pass rate of learners in FEDSAS member schools in the 2009 National Senior Certificate (NSC) examinations:

Province	FEDSAS Members' pass rate	Provincial pass rate	National pass rate
Limpopo	97.15%	48.90%	60.70%
Mpumalanga	94.84%	47.90%	60.70%
Gauteng	98.18%	71.80%	60.70%
North West	96.22%	67.50%	60.70%
Free State	92.64%	69.40%	60.70%
KwaZulu-Natal	95.62%	61.10%	60.70%
Northern Cape	95.83%	61.30%	60.70%
Eastern Cape	97.91%	50%	60.70%
Western Cape	99.05%	75.70%	60.70%
TOTAL	96.35%		60.70%

Our research shows that these results can be attributed to internal factors in the specific schools, including the following:

- The commitment and dedication of the teachers in these schools
- The quality of governance and management of the schools
- The leadership of the principals
- Discipline, structure (a continuous and rhythmic cycle in all school activities) and a sound work ethic

We are well aware of the fact that the foundation for the learners' success in our members' secondary schools had been laid in the years leading up to the final year of schooling. Credit is therefore also due to those involved in laying this foundation.

However, there is ample research confirming that, despite the excellence reflected above, the education system as a whole is failing the country:

- According to a presentation of the National Department of Education (DoE) to the Human Rights Commission when the latter investigated the issue of access to basic education, the rate of access to basic education is almost 100%.
- Despite this seemingly high level of access to basic education, about a million learners leave the school education system each year before they reach matric.
- The inflow/outflow of our schooling system is only about 24%, compared to the international norm of 65%. This means that only one in every four children entering the system has any hope of successfully completing their schooling career.
- The dismal performance of our learners in systemic evaluation of literacy and numeracy tests is well documented (e.g. SACMEQ, PIRLS, TIMSS).
- Some commentators estimate that about 80% of our public schools are dysfunctional. This figure can and will obviously be contested, depending on what one regards as a functional or dysfunctional school. Judged by our standards, FEDSAS estimates that only 10% of the total of approximately 25 000 public schools in the country can truly be regarded as functional.

The problems

Based on our own observations over many years of involvement in school education, and on the feedback received from FEDSAS members, it appears that the following aspects are primarily responsible for the failure by the larger part of the system to provide quality education to our children:

1. The teachers

There can be no doubt that the quality of the education provided in the classroom is determined by the teacher in that classroom. A committed and dedicated teacher can make the best of the worst curriculum in the world; a bad teacher, on the other hand, can turn the best curriculum in the world into a disaster.

The mere fact that the system is performing so dismally proves that there are far too many teachers who do not teach with the passion, commitment, enthusiasm and expertise required of them. We emphasise, though, that there still are thousands of dedicated and committed educators, and as an organisation *inter alia* representing parents, we pay tribute to and salute those teachers.

The role of some teacher unions representing the majority of educators in the country, is a great concern. They appear to put their political agendas before the interests of the learners, and from our members' perspective, nothing is being done to prevent their actions and the destructive role they play in the quest for quality education for all our children. The lack of work ethic, discipline and dedication many of these teachers display, is simply appalling.

Until these concerns are addressed, there is no prospect of an improvement in the quality of the classroom teaching that our children receive.

2. The officials

Without exception, the representations received from our members raise the issue of incompetent and inefficient officials at almost all levels of provincial DoEs. There is very little evidence of accountability, and the same lack of a sense of ethics permeates the system. Officials do not have the knowledge and expertise required for their positions, very often leading to a situation where senior officials know less about their particular field than the educators, principals and governors they are supposed to serve.

The most concerning aspect in this regard is that many officials do not have a clear understanding of the school education system, their own role in the system, and the

roles of others, e.g. school governors. This causes unnecessary conflict, often ending up in court, with the DoE almost invariably ending up the losing side.

Administrative and support systems are failing our children – not necessarily because these do not exist, but because the people who are supposed to drive the systems are incapable of doing so.

There is also an unacceptably high level of political motive among education officials.

A further serious concern is officials' interference and intrusion in the governance and management of functional and successful schools. Policies and procedures of these schools, determined in accordance with the applicable laws, are ignored, and principals are threatened with disciplinary action if unlawful instructions of senior officials are not complied with.

The failure by, in our view, 90% of the system to provide quality education to our children, puts pressure on, or sees officials forcing, the remaining 10% of schools to admit more and more learners. Something must give, and unfortunately, it seems that the small number of well-performing schools will bear the brunt of it.

3. The principals

The quality of management and leadership in a school is probably the most critical determinant of the eventual quality of learning and teaching in that school. It determines the discipline, the structure (continuous and rhythmic cycle of activities) and work ethic in the school. Very often, principals lack the required managerial knowledge and skills to be effective managers and leaders – simply because they have been trained to be teachers and not managers.

Effective managers and leaders (and teachers) in the successful schools are often overburdened with administrative and unnecessary paperwork and red tape, which do not contribute an iota to what is supposed to happen in the classroom. With

respect, we often get the impression that all the red tape required by the DoE officialdom is simply meant to create the impression of a ‘heavy workload’.

Effective principals are often undermined by some educators, teacher unions and officials, or simply do not get the necessary support from their circuit or district offices.

4. The school governing bodies

SGBs play an important part in the provision of quality education. It is therefore important that they function as best they can. However, training to enable this is inadequate or non-existent.

Once again, SGBs come across a lack of support from education departments, and undue interference and intrusion in their affairs.

5. Discipline and values

FEDSAS members regard the lack of discipline in schools – both amongst learners, and amongst teachers, governors and officials – as the single biggest threat to the quality of education.

We can cite many cases where schools’ efforts to maintain discipline, and to create an environment conducive to teaching and learning, are actively undermined. The most frustrating and destructive example is many provincial DoEs’ failure to deal with recommendations for the expulsion of learners timeously, expeditiously and in accordance with the law. Officials fail to understand that SGBs are to be treated as partners in the delivery of education, and as such, should be afforded the necessary respect.

The lack of universally accepted and acceptable ethical values amongst officials, parents, learners, teachers and everyone else involved in the education of our children, also lies at the heart of a system that discourages quality education. This

leads to a lack of delivery, a lack of accountability, and a generally irresponsible approach to the rights and best interests of our children.

6. Language in education

One of the top education specialists in this country recently stated that *English is the greatest barrier to education in this country*. By far the majority of learners in this country are not English-speaking. Yet, they are by choice (of their parents) and by default of education authorities forced to receive their schooling in English. Despite overwhelming research on, and evidence of, the importance of mother tongue education throughout the school career, nothing is being done to create an opportunity for the majority of learners in this country to complete their school careers in their mother tongue.

Already, the country is paying dearly for this failure, and will continue to do so.

7. The report of the Ministerial Committee on the National Education Evaluation and Development Unit (NEEDU)

Many, if not most, of the issues that we have highlighted above have been addressed in the abovementioned committee's report. In the chapter on its key findings, the committee expressed itself as follows:

Throughout the country, in each of the provinces, from government officials, unionists, and teachers alike, the Committee heard the strongest expressions of concern, often in very passionate terms, that there was an indisputable crisis in education, and that it needed to be resolved as a matter of urgency. The unanimity of the response lent courage to this report; indeed, it would be a serious mistake to underestimate the depth and intensity of concern among all education stakeholders.

We expected swift and decisive action to follow on the committee's finding that there is an "indisputable crisis in education" – but alas, the response has at best been half-

hearted and unfocused. It is noteworthy that the committee included representatives of all the major teaching unions, and that its findings and report were unanimous. However, already two of these unions have expressed reservations about, or even active opposition to, a unit such as NEEDU.

8. Other

FEDSAS knows of many other issues that impact on schools' ability to provide quality education. These include the following:

- Failure to make timeous or any transfer payments to schools
- The funding system, and particularly the quintile system
- Parallel-medium education is more expensive, and requires more teachers, than single-medium education. However, the funding model for schools makes no provision for this. Yet, schools are (often illegally) forced to provide instruction in more than one language, without proper financial assistance. The present model of post-provisioning does not adequately allow for schools that offer instruction in more than one language.
- Lack of delivery of learning and teaching support materials (LTSM), and in particular the failure to comply with the Norms and Standards for School Funding
- Failure to appoint teachers; failure to issue timeous or any post establishments for provinces or schools; failure to remunerate teachers, and especially temporary teachers
- Teachers still being ordered to attend training and other workshops during school hours
- Class sizes. The norm for the provisioning of educators (1:40 in primary schools, and 1:35 in secondary schools) is unrealistic, and does not take

account of the fact that some schools may have 11 or more different language groupings to deal with.

- An insufficient number of non-teaching staff
- Total chaos as far as inclusive education is concerned. Despite the fact that Education White Paper 6 was published in July 2001, it still has not taken legislative effect. It causes complete confusion in the system.
- Much has been said and written about our curriculum, and particularly the outcomes-based education (OBE) approach. The curriculum plays an important part in the appalling performance of our learners, as indicated above.

The solutions

As FEDSAS believes in not only pointing out the problems, but also actively being part of the solution, we have identified key priorities for the improvement of education that fall within the scope of our core business, as defined in our vision and mission statement. We are establishing a Development and Outreach Unit to assist those communities who need help with the development of governance, management and leadership in their schools. We will have to rely on external funding for this purpose.

In terms of expertise, material and knowledge, FEDSAS has the capacity to assist education authorities to address the identified issues that fall within the ambit of our core business. We offer to do so.

Apart from the above, FEDSAS proposes the following solutions to the aforementioned challenges:

1. Encourage success

The one-size-fits-all approach adopted in SASA is not appropriate for the South African schooling system. SGBs of successful schools should be given much more extensive powers, such as managing the total budget of the school, including payment of educators, appointment of educators and other staff, determining the curriculum of the school, and school management.

Instead of patching up weaknesses in the system with 'crisis management' solutions, FEDSAS believes that the creation of a different type of school to which everybody can aspire, will be a positive step in improving the system and its outcomes.

2. School funding

A fundamental overhaul of the Norms and Standards for School Funding is required. This must include the transfer of the total school budget to those schools that can manage it.

The quintile system is no longer appropriate, and must be replaced with a per-learner funding model.

The funding model must also address the issue of the increased cost of multilingual education.

3. NEEDU

Strong political will and leadership are required in the urgent implementation of the Ministerial Committee's recommendations.

NEEDU must focus on the service delivery gaps in provincial DoEs, as well as on learning and teaching in the classroom.

4. Language in education

A proper and detailed plan must be developed for compliance with the State's obligation in terms of Section 6(2) of the Constitution as far as school education is concerned.

It is often said that South African school education initiatives are typically a case of 'launch, lunch and leave'. Tragically, the perception has developed that ambitious plans are drawn up and launched, without any real impact. The Portfolio Committee should make this plan its priority, and must oversee its strict implementation.

5. The fundamentals

The system has seen enough quick-fix solutions to fundamental problems. FEDSAS believes that fundamental problems require fundamental solutions. We will only see an improvement in the system if the challenges we have highlighted above are met decisively and resolutely. FEDSAS stands ready to play its part in achieving this.

Once again, FEDSAS thanks the Portfolio Committee for the opportunity to make this written submission. If the Committee intends to arrange hearings, we will gladly elaborate orally on the issues we have raised.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Paul Colditz', enclosed within a large, loopy circular scribble.

Paul Colditz

CEO

28 February 2010