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When will white schools transform?

COMMENT

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Conservative
SGBs
threaten our
democracy in
very direct
ways

There are few more complex problems in the education policy domain today than the one represented in the battle over school governing bodies (SGBs) and transformation.

The Minister of Education indicated that she wishes to revisit the powers of SGBs since these authorities tend to put a brake on important goals such as the deracialisation of the teaching force in former white schools.

The major white opposition party, and not a few former white schools, came out strongly against government interference, the memorable phrase of Helen Zille capturing the media's attention: "they want to break what is fixed because they cannot fix what is broken".

If only complex policies could be reduced to such simplistic slogans.

To understand the dilemma facing government, and the schools, a bit of history is necessary.

In the heat of the anti-apartheid struggle since the 1970s, one of the most consistent demands on the agenda was that power over education decision-making, locked up in the state, should be returned to communities.

Parents should be entrusted with the running of schools, the appointment of educators, and even share authority with teachers in matters of curriculum, teaching and learning.

In part a reaction to the totalitarian control of the apartheid bureaucracy over even the minutiae of school administration, this demand for greater involvement of parents and students in matters of school governance became the basis for many national and regional campaigns.

At the first signs of a possible end to apartheid, the policy deliberations of the broad anti-apartheid movement, as well as the political negotiations among former enemies, devoted attention to this historic demand - parents must have greater powers of decision-making over what happens in their schools.

What could not have been anticipated during those days of struggle was how a soundly democratic principle would become the very instrument wielded by conservative white SGBs to keep their schools white.

To put this bluntly, what was intended during struggle as a way of empowering black communities to have a greater say over their education, turned out to empower white communities to do exactly the same - but with totally undemocratic consequences.

It would of course be unfair to make this case against the SGBs of all former white schools, since there are some wonderful examples of schools where the governing bodies have created truly inclusive school cultures.

But the truth is this country still has far too many all-white schools in which SGBs have used language policy or admission policy or teacher appointment processes to retain the dominant culture and clientele of the school.

This places the minister in a predicament.

If she reduces the powers of SGBs over, say, the appointment of teachers, she could rightly be charged with violating a sacred principle, ie to give local school communi-

ties, and parents in particular, greater control over what they believe is important in their schools.

If she retains the status quo, she could be charged of turning a blind eye to the flagrant abuse of a democratic principle by school communities who have no compelling interest in transformation.

By the way, the Namibian government dealt with this without any qualms - they simply placed black principals in charge of some former white schools.

For South Africa, such imposition of governmental authority on schools could have negative longterm consequences; as I have indicated in other forums, once we begin to tamper with or give up hard-won democratic rights, the loss is irreversible.

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Yet in countless talks to and with white SGBs across the country over the past five years, I have constantly warned them that either they work proactively to create genuinely diverse school cultures, especially with regard to teacher appointments, or they face the real prospect of an impatient government starting to do it for them.

In the education heartland of Pretoria stands five venerable institutions: the University of Pretoria, Girls High and Boys High, Seuns Hoër and Meisies Hoër.

All five have white principals, English for the English schools, Afrikaners for the Afrikaans institutions. The girls' schools have women principals, the boys' schools, men. Exactly as they were 100 years ago. Transformation, my foot!

The question facing us is this: what if these SGBs continue on their path of resistance, raising tired arguments about language rights (to keep out non-Afrikaans speakers) or academic standards (to keep out non-white teachers)? Then we have a problem, for when developing countries encounter such dilemmas, politics wins over policy, and the demands of the state tend to override the idiosyncrasies of community.

Put differently, these conservative SGBs threaten our democracy in very direct ways and their racism must be exposed for what it is.

What I cannot understand, though, is a recent twist in government's position on SGBs. The new focus is on the school principal, the argument being that these school leaders find themselves constrained to lead transformation and manage their schools because of recalcitrant SGBs.

I have no idea where this comes from. There certainly is no evidence that across the country, SGBs put a brake on school leadership and management, especially as far as transformation is concerned. I can think of any number of schools where this might be the case; but I can also think of many other schools where the principal governs the school and holds the SGB to ransom.

In many white schools, in my experience, the principal is very often a happy part of the SGB conspiracy to retard transformation. To therefore single out the principal as the focus of governmental attention makes no sense whatsoever.

In the end, even this is a distraction from the real issue, which is: whether and how fast our former white schools will transform.

Eleven years is a long time to wait.

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