

Source: CITY PRESS

Date: 25-Apr-2004

Topic: 25

Ref No: 2161



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ID: 03082103-01 Source Page: 16

Open letter to the education minister

One of the critical areas of transformation (or lack thereof) during the past 10 years has been in the field of education. While major achievements have been made during the 10 years to amalgamate the different sectors of education that existed in the past, many believe there's still a lot that needs to be done. Professor **Jonathan Jansen** from Pretoria University, sketches the challenges and areas that still need attention in the education system, including illiteracy and pre-school education, in an open letter to whoever will be appointed the minister of education after President Thabo Mbeki's inauguration.

DEAR Minister

By the time you read this letter, you will already know that you are the third minister of education in our young democracy.

I have lived through two of them as commentator, critic, researcher, evaluator, teacher, professor, leader, teacher educator and even (occasional) consultant to your government. With this experience in mind, I thought I would share some advice that you might find useful as you take charge of this most precious asset of any nation - its education system.

Let me say right off the bat that you could do the nation a huge favour and halt the mindless promulgation of new policies.

With the possible exception of the French, we have produced the highest number of new (and often impressive) policies for everything from smoking in schools to initiation in universities. Frankly, you should know that teachers have reached a point of exhaustion with new policies.

You should also know that most of your predecessor's policies have not worked - if by policy is meant an improvement in the depth of learning and the quality of teaching in our schools.

Teachers now work harder, are more stressed, do more futile tasks and find themselves more confused than ever before. I know it feels good to spin a new policy; those pretentious bureaucrats in your department, inexperienced and unskilled, get a real kick out of assuming that their job is to

spin policy, scare people, and secure added status.

So, on the political and the bureaucratic front, generating yet another layer of policies will feel good, whether these policies work or not. You should resist this temptation. South Africans are tired of new education policies.

What you could do, rather, is to make your existing policies work. This means, though, that you need to change your understanding of what a minister is about. If you find yourself preoccupied with your own voice and your own ego, then you will spend your time trying to impress the president and the people with gimmicks, like flashy, short-term, dramatic changes that any serious student of educational reform will tell you are simply unsustainable.

In fact, I can share with you a number of gimmicks to make more learners pass matric and to double the graduation rates at universities. You will look good, I promise you.

However, what you will also do with such irresponsible behaviour is to damn Africa's most promising democracy and vibrant economy to join the ranks of corrupt governments that litter the third world.

I must tell you that both common sense and research is clear: improving the quality of teaching and raising learning achievements takes time. It is hard work, unspectacular work and patient work. Yet it can be done.

Begin by ensuring that every one of our 29 000 schools has a qualified teacher for every subject, that every learner has a textbook, and that every school has electricity and toilets.

Then double the investment in in-service teacher development but ensure these resources are deployed in accordance with the smarter-closer-longer principle.

By "smarter" I mean that the persons providing such develop-

ment training are impeccably skilled for the task.

By "closer" I mean bringing teacher support into the classrooms where teachers work and where these interventions have real meaning and application. And by "longer" I mean ensuring that the development support stays for much longer in classrooms than the odd workshop or information session allows.

While I am on this subject, as a politician you will find yourself frustrated from time to time with the slow but steady pace of progress. When this happens, my advice is that you do not try to find scapegoats in the (mostly former) white schools and universities because you are unable to show dramatic changes in that important political constituency - black schools and black universities. This is not only morally suspect, it is strategically short-sighted.

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ID: 03082103-02 Source Page: 16

You see, in 10 years' time, these former white universities will be emphatically integrated and truly African (not ethnic) institutions. While cutting their subsidies now might win you short-term approval among those who still fight racial demons in their private and political lives, such actions will effectively reduce all our universities to basket cases. And you know as well as I, that Africa needs at least three to five African universities that are truly world-class.

The same is true of schools. It must be so tempting to hit on former white English schools for hiking their school fees to such an extent that only the children of ambassadors and government ministers can afford to attend, thereby keeping the school largely white. Or the elite Afrikaans-speaking schools who use language to achieve the same result. But you

cannot win these battles with a plan for penalising these schools by withdrawing their remaining subsidies or disallowing them from hiring their own teachers – for two reasons.

First, you need the savings effected by these schools spending private monies on their own services. And second, there are other more effective ways of pushing the desegregation of these schools.

When this frustration comes your way I suggest you do two things. First, take heart from J G Strijdom, C R Swart and General Smuts – these are the real South African schools where, despite their white and conservative histories, were able to desegregate without significant white flight.

It is in these schools where new South African identities and loyalties are being forged. Second, stay focused on the schools that need you. Most black children will not be accommodated within these few elite schools – your energies and resources should be deployed where it matters, in the rural and under-served schools.

Which brings me to your department in Schoeman Street. There are some excellent people there who combine technical expertise with social commitment, personal humanity with systems capacity.

Most of your officials, however, are not there because of their outstanding technical capacities; they are there either to make up the racial numbers and/or as compensation for their contribution to the struggle.

I understand and accept that these things are necessary. But, minister, we cannot go into the

third term of an ANC-led government with our bureaucracy loaded with quasi-politicians rather than expert technicians! This explains

why your department spends so much money on western consultants who are paid huge salaries (in dollars) without leaving a trace of capacity within the system.

You may also wish to take a hard look at the provinces. You will notice, with two exceptions, that the provinces are completely inept at delivering training and development services in the schools. That is because the provincial personnel form a hodgepodge of former bantustan bureaucrats, local activists and retrenched teachers who simply do not have the advanced skills to capacitate the expectant teacher with the competences to implement your policies at the classroom level.

As a result, these provincial personnel have become policy messengers rather than capacity developers, carrying out functions that are more efficiently provided by the national postal services.

My suggestion is that you be courageous. Cut the personnel at national by 60 percent, deploy the most competent of these Schoeman Street staff to the provinces (let them do real work), and find a way of sending 40 percent of the provincial staff into productive employment elsewhere.

Unfortunately, minister, there are two areas in which we have made no progress whatsoever. These are not high-profile, attention-grabbing, status-enhancing fields. But it involves the most vulnerable in our communities, those without the voice and the status that schools and universities can muster. You will have to do something about the high levels of illiteracy in our country, and you will have to take early childhood education seriously.

If we do not provide illiterate adults with what I am sure you

would agree is a human right – the capacity to read and write – we fail our democracy. I need not tell you that a percentage of these persons are in this position precisely because they sacrificed formal schooling to enable us to be in this democracy today.

Now, Minister, about the personal qualities for the job.

In tackling problems such as illiteracy and pre-school education, I propose modesty. Please do not make spectacular claims that you will “break the back of illiteracy” during your term. Rather, set

about this task with a comprehensive plan, committed personnel and skilled bureaucrats.

In dealing with your critics, I propose patience. They take democracy seriously and, you will find, most of them care deeply about education in our country.

In dealing with the education stakeholders, I advise you spend more time listening than talking.

In dealing with the future, I advise clarity of purpose.

Tell your principals that HIV causes Aids, that the virus kills people, and that anti-retroviral drugs could at least prolong lives. Tell young people that there is no more noble profession than teaching, and that you will provide substantial bursaries (not loans) for at least five years to attract the best and the brightest into teaching.

And tell teachers that they are not idiots, and that you apologise for the fact that the new curriculum sold the message that their competence and experience from the past was completely flawed and irrelevant.

Finally, Minister, allow me to congratulate you on your appointment by the president.

Yours sincerely,
Jonathan Jansen