

Source: THIS DAY

Date: 23-Apr-2004

Topic: 25

Ref No: 1960



1

ID: 03076478-01 Source Page: 11

JONATHAN JANSEN

It's time for Asmal to go

Ten years on education needs no more shaking up

At the end of the term of the first post-apartheid minister of education in 1999, the education system in South Africa stood on the brink of a crisis.

While foundational policies — such as three major white papers on education — had been set to chart the future course of education and 19 race-based departments had been formally integrated, there was an obvious lack of vitality, discipline and optimism in the education system.

The legacy of destabilised schools and universities threatened to undermine the standing and legitimacy

of the new government. Corrupt and incompetent leaders in several universities and technikons had not only drained the meagre reserves of those institutions, they had effectively placed these national assets in severe debt and at risk of permanent closure. Worse, these heads lacked the managerial or leadership capacity to bring students to order and restore credibility among staff. Schools started late and finished early. Teaching was a sporadic event and the examination results confirmed that the much-vaunted "culture of teaching and learning" campaign of the reconstruction and development programme was a decisive failure.

In Kader Asmal, the second post-apartheid minister, the education system found a saviour. His combination of forceful personality and political skill led to a major shake-up in education not seen since the days of HF Verwoerd. Legislation was changed to provide for, among other things, the ministerial appointment of an administrator should the head of a university or technikon fail to manage an institution competently.

A series of commissioners was deployed to failing institutions and their published reports on the Internet offered a damning account of the depth of the crisis in some of the black universities and technikons.

Schools got a rude awakening. Suddenly, a minister showed up unexpectedly in schools and classrooms, damning laziness among teachers and pulling provincial bureaucrats out of their perpetual slumber. Underperforming schools in the matric examination were blacklisted and their names openly published by performance category for all to see. Senior and junior bureaucrats were removed from cosy positions and castigated

in public. A trend in those days was for the minister to publicly slate an official only to then have his "communication" people play it down. But the damage had been done and the message got out.

Asmal even took on the sacred cow of the first five years — outcomes-based education — vowing that this policy would not retain "scriptural authority", but be subjected to possible review. That was not enough. He would also rethink "the landscape of higher education" which, few realised at the time, would even-

...for adult literacy is not simply about being able to read and write; it is crucially about empowering people for civic participation

Source: THIS DAY

Date: 23-Apr-2004

Topic: 25

Ref No: 1960



1

ID: 03076478-02 Source Page: 11

tually lead to the most comprehensive restructuring of universities since the late 1950s. What followed was a *Call to Action* (Tirisano), spelling out in unprecedented detail the priority areas for intervention in what was widely regarded at the time as a failing education system.

What also followed was a carefully orchestrated media blitz. The public imagination was captured and the education system — from rural schools in Tzaneen to his department in Schoeman Street, Pretoria — was put on notice.

Five years later, there are many education analysts, university managers and school teachers who want to see Asmal removed from this portfolio. What went wrong?

In the first place, there is a big difference between shaking up a system and consolidating a

system; between drawing attention to the ills of education and developing the capacity to change them; between short-term gimmicks and sustainable reform; between clamping down on under-performers and destroying the morale of hard-working teachers; between silencing voices and winning over partners.

What Asmal was good at in each case was the shake-up. What he simply does not have the competence or patience to do is

to

slowly and systematically build on the initial gains with the necessary interventionist strategy during the early months of his tenure.

What does this mean for the future? It almost certainly means that a new minister will have to concentrate time on making existing policies work rather than generate another slate of ambitious education plans. There is a serious credibility problem in schools as far as policy is concerned: teachers are confused and exhausted by the constant shifts in the policy environment and the ever-increasing demands made on their time. There has been a deliberate depreciation

of their value and experience in policy and this will cost the country greatly. The most important challenge of a new minister might be to regain the professional confidence of a stressed community of teachers.

The new minister will also have to ensure action on the two areas of government policy in which no progress has been made whatsoever. First, in the area of adult literacy this country with its impressive resources has failed where poorer nations such as Nicaragua and Cuba have made impressive strides.

Despite Asmal's ridiculous promise of "breaking the back of illiteracy within five years" this sector remains under-resourced in financial terms and under-supported in political terms. Our democracy is threatened by such carelessness, for adult literacy is not simply about being able to read and write; it is crucially about empowering people for civic participation.

Second, in the area of early childhood education there has been a dangerous lack of progress despite an impressive white paper on the subject. Without the foundations of learning being established among young children, stubborn and destructive inequalities will certainly persist in school and society.

Perhaps the greatest challenge facing South Africa is the incompetence of the nine provinces. In education the provincial personnel combine Bantustan bureaucrats, local activists and retrenched teachers who simply do not enjoy the competency profiles necessary to deliver the much needed training and development support to teachers "on the ground". Some provinces such as the Eastern Cape have become so dysfunctional that their continued existence is nothing more than a burden on the fiscus.

To be sure, several of these challenges can only be resolved in the broader political domain. It is well known that Asmal's plans for the restructuring of higher education and the retooling of the provinces were much more ambitious than his cabinet colleagues would allow.

For this reason, basic education services such as paying teachers on time in the Eastern Cape, delivering effective in-service training to teachers in the Limpopo province, or ensuring that every school has a solid and healthy infrastructure are not simply a matter of delivery.

It is, fundamentally, a concern of politics. And unless the politicians at national and provincial level are sufficiently moved to intervene in these areas, we can expect "more of the same" in the next 10 years — at great cost to our still wobbly democracy.

■ Jonathan Jansen is dean of education at the University of Pretoria