The tables have turned on governing bodies

Can (white) schools be trusted with transformation? This is the question posed by Prof Jonathan Jansen, Dean of Education, University of Pretoria.

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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: to give local school communities, 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 with turning a blind eye to the flagrant abuse of a democratic principle by school communities who have no compelling interest in transformation. 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 long-term consequences. Once we begin to tamper with or give up hard-won democratic rights, the loss is irreversible.

Yet in countless talks 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 stand five venerable institutions: the University of Pretoria, Girls High and Boys High, Seuns Hoër and Meisies Hoër. All five have white principals, English white for the English schools, Afrikaners for the Afrikaans institutions. The girls’ schools have...
principals, the boys' schools, men. Exactly as they were 100 years ago.

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)? 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, thes 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 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: will our former white schools transform, and if so, when? Eleven years is a long time to wait.