

Reforming Basic Education in South Africa.

By Paul Hoffman SC

At present the South African public school system is delivering functionally literate Black (African) matriculants at a rate of 1 in 29 of those who enter our educational system. [Functional literacy means having the reading and writing skills necessary for everyday living *and* the workplace, i.e. equivalent to 8 years of successful formal schooling in the mother tongue *or* preferred language of learning.] This is dire; as Thomas Jefferson put it: “A nation that hopes to be ignorant and free... hopes for something that never was and never will be.”

One of the more hopeful signs to emerge from the ashes of the bonfires of Polokwane is that the new leadership of the ANC appears to have identified the state of basic education in the country as a problem in need of urgent attention.

In any discussion of the current state of education, it needs to be acknowledged that the task presented to the new South African government post liberation in 1994 was a Herculean one. Each homeland had an education system of its own and in South Africa there was a separate education department for each race group. Now there are no homelands and we live in a non-racial, non-sexist multi-party democracy. This welcome change has necessitated a massive re-organization of the management of the education system involving the melding of disparate fragments of varying quality. This is no easy task.

It also needs to be acknowledged that more Herculean efforts are required in order to transform basic education into a functional system which is well able to deliver the quality of education needed to empower the youth and the previously uneducated segments of society. This to make them into happy and useful citizens who are well equipped to build the type of future for the nation that is envisaged in the Constitution. Blaming apartheid for the ills of the education system is an excuse that is wearing increasingly thin as time passes. The children now entering the system of education are “born-frees.” They are entitled to more than “gutter education.”

The Bill of Rights guarantees the right to basic education to everyone. This right is not classified as a socio-economic right subject to “progressive realization” over time. It is a right that has been due and claimable by everyone, child and adult alike, since 1994. The State is required by law to respect, protect, promote and fulfil the right to basic education along with all of the other rights and freedoms enshrined in the Constitution. If it does not do so, it is acting illegally and can be brought before the Courts for the purpose of obtaining suitable legal redress. This form of help could include a declaration of rights and an order directing the education authorities to take the steps necessary to correct that which ails the system. Also, a supervision order is claimable in terms of which the education authorities will be required to report back to the Courts on the progress being made toward the realization of the right to basic education for all at stipulated intervals. In this way a constitutionally compliant system of education can be put in place, to the overall benefit of society as well as to those who learn and those who teach. It is, on any

analysis of the war on poverty, ignorance and disease, through education that these three scourges will most sustainably and effectively be conquered. It is also self-evident that a child who comes to school hungry and sick is not as well able to benefit from classes as a healthy, disciplined and well fed child. Children who are orphaned by AIDS and other causes have responsibilities in family context which detract from their ability to take full benefit from any education system. These are very real problems in a society in which 47% of the population live in relative poverty and 8% on less than a dollar a day. It is also shameful that these “poorest of the poor” have doubled in number between 1996 and 2005. Recent widening of the social grants umbrella, which now covers some 12 million people does address dire poverty, but it is not sustainable to have so many indefinitely on welfare in a developmental state. Promoting the achievement of equality, a constitutional goal of the new South Africa, can obviously not take place in a context in which the gap between the “haves” and the “have nots” is allowed to grow in this way. The most sustainable way in which to close this gap is to provide quality education that prepares learners to become economically active members of society. At the moment those emerging from schools find themselves swelling the ranks of the unemployed and the criminal under-class.

The most frightening statistic (source Hough & Horne) to emerge from the system as it has functioned in the last 12 or so years relates to the rate of functional literacy of Black matriculants who have been subjected to the current educational system. In round numbers: of the 1,560,000 six year olds who entered the first grade of our public school system 12 years ago only two thirds reached grade 10 and a third made it to matric at the end of last year. Of these, some 360,000 passed. On being tested for their functional literacy in English (their preferred language of learning) it was found that only 15% of the 278,000 Black matriculants are functionally literate. The gross number is 42,000 Black school leavers with the potential to hold down a skilled job. Put differently, each province on average produced only 4600 functionally literate Black matriculants in 2007.

The situation portrayed by these figures is a national disgrace. Unpacked and made digestible they mean that only 1 in 29 (i.e. 3.5%) Black children entering the school system emerge with matric certificates in a state which enables them to enter the realms of trainability, skills acquisition, higher education and employability in an economy in which skills are in short supply. Menial workers are no longer needed in any great numbers due to globalization, mechanization and a labour dispensation that discourages their employment. Our school drop out rate is 77% over the twelve years of schooling. According to UNESCO figures, the international norm is 21%.

These are monumental problems, and there is no quick fix solution. The most enlightened and progressive provincial education departments are aware of the poor return the taxpayer is receiving on the investment in education voted in their budgets each year. Means of “boxing smarter” are being devised. Leadership training of staff in schools and in management of education is an effective way of introducing some positive energy. Organizational shortcomings, dysfunctional schools and the problems of teachers who do not teach, or even know how to do so, need to be addressed. The phenomena of violence and ill-discipline at schools are obvious threats to improvement. The failure to insist on

mother tongue education in the formative years is another factor which experts say contributes to poor performance. Parents who want their children educated in English will have to take responsibility for raising them from birth to speak and think in English, failing which, their early education, in the best interests of each child, will have to be in the mother tongue. A radical revision of the way in which education is supplied, administered and delivered is needed if the situation is to be corrected. The nation is in peril of regressing if nothing is done.

Paul Hoffman SC
Director: Centre For Constitutional Rights,
F.W. de Klerk Foundation
Cape Town
4 April 2008.