

Press Release

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South African Institute of Race Relations

The power of ideas

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The power of parental involvement in South Africa's schools

The real divide in South African education is not between independent and public schools, but between good and bad ones. And what typically defines the good schools – including ‘no-fee’ township schools in communities classified as being too poor to be allowed to charge fees (representative of some 88% of the almost 24 000 public schools) – is strong parental involvement that reinforces teaching-focused leadership.

This is where the focus of South Africa's education policy should be directed.

These are the key points in the report, ‘Achievement and Enterprise in School Education’ [[here](#)] by IRR Policy Fellow John Kane-Berman, which forms part of the IRR's Education Charter initiative launched last week to generate public support for desperately needed change in South Africa's chronically deficient schooling system.

The report is based on a pilot study of 12 top-scoring Gauteng schools from across the socioeconomic spectrum, four independent schools, and eight public schools, five of them ‘no-fee’ township schools.

With the exception of one suburban school whose overall matric pass rate was 93%, and one township school whose rate was 95%, all eight of the secondary schools in the study achieved rates of between 98% and 100%.

The key markers of success across the case studies were the presence of committed, competent principals who managed staff and resources with skill, enterprise and care; devoted, hard-working teachers willing to take on extra tuition and give their all for the benefit of pupils; strong parental involvement to support the efforts of principals and teachers; and an emphasis on discipline – including punctuality, and rules on school uniforms and hairstyles – and on instilling positive values in pupils.

The report recommends among other things:

- Strengthening School Governing Bodies (SGBs) to stimulate parental involvement and reinforce accountability;
- Reconsidering the 'no fee' policy, which could be done by earmarking part of the child support grant of R350 per month per child up to the age of 18 for school fees. (This would encourage greater parental involvement in the school, while providing some income for hiring additional teachers); and
- Resisting interference in the recommendations of SGBs by, for instance, imposing unwanted principals on schools.

The report also addresses objections to the growing trend of independent or privately funded schooling, pointing out that '(d)issatisfaction with lower pass rates in public schools has generated demand for more independent schools, including low-fee independent schools'.

Parents choosing the independent schooling route, Kane-Berman writes, 'are making obviously rational choices ... but so are those who send their children to public suburban schools rather than to independent schools. They are looking for better education, irrespective of whether it is provided by public or independent schools'.

He observes that while 'independent schools, especially those run by private operators or owned by private investors, are sometimes accused of contributing to "stratification" in education, the real distinction ... is not between public and independent schools but between good and bad schools, especially good and bad public schools'.

'From the point of view of the consumers of school education – pupils and their parents – it is immaterial whether a school is run by the state or by one or another kind of private organisation or investor. What counts is the quality of education provided....

'More and more parents in South Africa and elsewhere are exercising choice in schooling. This is something to welcome and encourage, especially in South Africa, where apartheid ruled out such choice.'

Giving South Africans the opportunity to endorse greater parental involvement in schools as a first step to rescuing the education system from the grave crisis it is in is the primary objective of the IRR's Education Charter [\[here\]](#).

The Charter is addressed to the politicians who are directly involved in managing the country's schooling system; the Minister of Basic Education, the nine provincial education MECs and the Official Opposition's Shadow Minister of Basic Education.

It urges them to heed growing public anxiety about the state of education in South Africa, and to implement policies that give parents the greater control and influence over schools which, universally, have led to better results in the classroom.

Ends.