

Press Release

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South African Institute of Race Relations

The power of ideas

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Charting a way to successful schooling in South Africa

The latest report from the Institute of Race Relations (IRR) – ‘The South African Education Crisis: Giving power back to parents’ – makes the case for a decisive intervention to save our children from a future blighted by the profound failings in our schooling system.

It places parents at the front and centre of efforts to turn our failing schools around.

The report provides a detailed analysis of outcomes that ‘fail to prepare children for life at university or in the workplace’, and which have a disproportionate impact on black children from poor communities, the very people who count most on education to give them access to a future of advancement and success.

It notes: ‘This has major implications for transformation and solving issues such as unemployment and poverty in South Africa. As long as the country is burdened with poor educational outcomes, these problems will remain with us for years to come, with dire consequences for the future of South Africa.’

The report argues, however, that acknowledging the desire of parents for better schooling, and giving them greater influence and control over schools, would be the most effective step South Africa could take to overcome despair and set the country’s schools on the path of achievement and progress.

‘The South African Education Crisis: Giving power back to parents’ is part of the IRR’s Education Charter initiative launched last week to generate public support for getting parents more directly involved in schools.

Author of the report, IRR campaign manager Marius Roodt, says greater choice for parents in where they send their children to school, and greater control over the school their children attend, and how it operates, will result in better outcomes.

Strengthening School Governing Bodies, and giving them wider powers – rather than eroding them, as present policy initiatives intend to do – should go hand-in-hand with a new approach to funding, and the introduction of charter or contract schools.

The report proposes a voucher system – not unlike the funding model used successfully elsewhere in the world – which ‘would effectively be a universal bursary system’.

Roodt writes: ‘Some state schools could be sold to community groups, churches, non-profit organisations, and private education providers for a nominal amount (say R1), similar to the charter or contract school system used abroad. These schools would then be responsible for the payment of salaries and upkeep of the school.’

Parents would be given a voucher for each child, which they could use towards education, whether at an independent school, an ordinary state school, a Model C school, or a school run by entrepreneurs. Education spending would be redirected to pupils, to around the value of R16 000 per year (more or less what per capita spend on learners is today).

‘This would give parents far more choice than they have today, especially those on lower incomes,’ Roodt argues. ‘Parents could shop around for the best education for their children. Poor-performing schools would soon experience an exodus of pupils. Principals and teachers at these schools would soon realise that unless their offering was improved they would be jobless.’

The report says that if schools have to shut down because of a lack of pupils, their facilities could be auctioned off to Curro, or Spark, or other private-schooling organisations. Their buildings would then be refurbished and new schools opened.

‘Parents will have more choice and a more diverse school system will have been created, with parents having a choice between independent schools, state schools, former Model C schools, and charter schools.’

The report adds that this would also ‘be a way of breaking the power of teachers’ unions such as SADTU – schooling would once again focus on what is best for the child, rather than what is best for the teacher’.

‘We estimate that these vouchers would be enough to provide high-quality schooling to all children. In the case of schools charging higher fees, parents could top up the difference through their vouchers. Parents will also be able to choose the ethos and curriculum of their school.’

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.

Read the full report [here](#).

Ends.