

Press Release

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South African Institute of Race Relations
The power of ideas

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Best township schools point way to overhauling education

The latest report from the Institute of Race Relations (IRR) – “Achievement and Enterprise in School Education” – acknowledges the achievements of a sample of 12 top-scoring public and independent schools in Gauteng, and reveals the scope for significant improvements in South Africa’s notoriously deficient education system.

The report examines the changing nature of South African schools, the growing demand among parents for a better education for their children, the increasing role of independent schools in meeting this demand, as well as the signal successes achieved within the public school system – even among poor ‘no-fee’ schools.

Author of the report, IRR Policy Fellow John Kane-Berman, notes that “the real division in South Africa is not between public and independent schools but between good schools and bad ones”.

This is borne out by the results of this pilot study of 12 top-scoring schools in Gauteng, four independent schools, and eight public schools. Five of the public schools were ‘no-fee’ township schools in communities classified by the department as too poor to be allowed to charge fees (representative of some 88% of South Africa’s almost 24 000 public schools).

Kane-Berman notes: “With the exception of one suburban school whose overall NSC 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%. So there was little difference in the performance of township and suburban schools ...”

He adds: “The success of some of the no-fee and low-fee township schools ... is inspiring.”

The key markers of success across the case studies are the presence of committed, competent principals who manage 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.

“Achievement and Enterprise in School Education” argues the case for replicating the successes achieved by the schools covered in the study.

Kane-Berman writes: “The starting-point of this research into successful public and independent schools, including those dedicated to serving poor communities, was our belief that there are among them some unacknowledged success stories.

“The results vindicate this view. Although the sample is small ... a number of proposals to replicate these successes suggest themselves.”

Key suggestions are

- Making sure all schools are headed by principals able and empowered to enforce discipline. (The department should consider giving all public schools disciplinary powers, including the power of expulsion, subject to specified guidelines);
- Ensuring an adequate supply of suitably qualified teachers.
- 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.)
- Resisting interference in the recommendations of SGBs by, for instance, imposing unwanted principals on schools;
- Celebrating and publicising the successes of high-achieving no-fee public schools serving poor communities, “giving full credit to their principals and their teachers”; and
- Concentrating a major effort on “helping other such schools to emulate the success of these few”.

Says Kane-Berman: “Even though (no-fee township schools) have so much less in terms of human and other resources than suburban schools, their principals made no complaints about this. These admirable men and women displayed pride in their schools and determination to overcome whatever difficulties they faced.”

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”.

Notably, the independent township school that the IRR visited charges R1 000 in grade 12, but less in the lower grades. Another of the independent schools in the survey charges R480 a year, although the main finances of the school are provided by an extensive fundraising campaign directed at the private sector.)

Welcoming the encouragement of greater private investment in education in Africa in the MDG (Millennium Development Goals) 2014 report, Kane-Berman writes: “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...”

He adds: “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.”

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