EQUAL EDUCATION
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campaign for
school libraries

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COMMENT

ON ACTION PLAN 2014: TOWARDS THE REALISATION OF 'SCHOOLING 2025'
(as published in the Government Gazette, No. 33434, General Notice 752 of 2010, 2 August 2010)

Introduction:

1. Equal Education (EE) is a movement of learners, parents, teachers and community members, working for quality and equality in education, through research analysis and activism.

2. Equal Education welcomes the opportunity to provide input on the draft Action Plan 2014: Towards the realisation of Schooling 2025 (hereafter referred to as 'draft Action Plan').

3. EE supports the DBE's initiative to develop a long term plan to address the problems in our education system. It is important for all relevant stakeholders, including parents, teachers and teacher unions, community members, and civil society at large to contribute towards developing this plan.

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4. There are many challenges facing the improvement of our education system. Unequal access to quality education lies at the heart of all these challenges. The majority of poor and working class learners continue to receive a low quality education, while their peers who are privileged (by virtue of their socio economic status) that attend former Model-C schools are provided with the necessary tools to excel.

5. Any plan to fix the education system must, as a primary focus, seek to improve the quality of learning received by poor learners of our country.

6. In order to progressively address these challenges it is critical that the DBE has a long term vision and plan for 'making our schools better.'

7. Further, it is important that such a plan is developed in consultation with important stakeholders and that it is widely and clearly communicated. The implementation of this plan will have to be clearly monitored, and where necessary adapted to be more responsive to actual conditions in our schools.

8. Importantly, and necessary for effective monitoring, the plan must set itself clear targets and strategies for achieving those targets if it is to adequately address the pressing needs of the current education system.

9. The draft Action Plan sets out to give effect to much of the above, and for that the DBE must be commended. There are many important acknowledgments and recommendations contained in the draft Action Plan. Generally it highlights the most important concerns regarding our education system.

10. This input focuses on highlighting key aspects of the draft Action Plan, and making constructive recommendations to address its possible shortcomings.

KEY ELEMENTS OF THE ACTION PLAN

The need to identify problem areas in the system

11. The first important aspect of the Action Plan is its identification of key parts of the education system that contribute towards it failures. These include, *inter alia*: the lack of proper long term planning; the lack of effective monitoring systems to track performance and development; poor management of schools and the need for more and better training of school principals; teacher capacity problems and the need for teacher development; poor quality of education in the ECD phase; poor literacy and numeracy levels; the lack of adequate access to crucial learning materials (including textbooks, school libraries, computers and laboratories) and poor school infrastructure.

12. Clearly identifying these challenges is the first important step before they can be properly addressed.

Goals, Indicators, Targets and Activities

13. Secondly, the Action Plan's mix of goals, indicators, targets and activities are important if the Action Plan is to be properly implemented and monitored. Without this set of goals, indicators and activities, this plan would be of little value. However, as will be discussed below, there is a need to develop this aspect of the draft plan further. It will be submitted that a better balance of this mix could be achieved and that there is a need for more targets which are relevant to particular goals. It must be noted however, that the emphasis on proper monitoring and evaluation throughout the draft Action Plan is welcomed.

14. The targets which are set out in the Action Plan, particularly those relating to 'educational outputs,' provide clear baseline targets and provide a good bar against which to measure certain improvements and to track continuing problems in the system. The same should be employed in other sections of the draft Action Plan. Specific recommendations in this regard will be provided below.

Monitoring and reporting on progress and shortcomings in the education system.

15. The introduction of the Annual National Assessment (ANA) in grades 3, 6 and 9 is an important initiative of the DBE. This will go a long way in ensuring that that the national department will be able to track progress in literacy and numeracy levels at critical stages.

16. We agree that the ANA can provide for the improvements as set out in the Action Plan.[1] It also notes that South Africa will continue to participate in the SAQMEC,[2] TIMSS[3] and PIRLS.[4] These programmes provide an important monitoring tool that allows us to measure our progress against that of other countries.

17. Further, while it is important for the DBE to implement mechanisms to ensure that there is accountability on the part of Provincial Education Departments, District offices and Schools, it is also important for the DBE itself to be held accountable. For this reason the DBE's initiative to publish an annual report on the schooling system, as well as the introduction of a complaints officer is important and welcomed.

18. However, in light of the above, it is crucial that the annual report also provides the DBE's analysis of the needs of the education system and how it will respond to this, and not only statistical measures of progress. This would allow for more constructive engagement between the DBE and other important stakeholders in enhancing responsiveness to gaps in the education system.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

[1] Government Gazette, 33434, at pg 47, para21.
[2] The Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality.
[3] Trends in Mathematics and Science Study.
[4] Progress in International Reading Study.

TEACHERS

The need to improve teaching (working) conditions

19. Goals 14 – 18 of the draft Action Plan deal with teachers. There can be no question as to the important role that teachers play in the learning process. An education system cannot operate without teachers who are well trained, well paid and respected, and who work under conditions which are favourable to teaching and learning.

20. Yet as the Action acknowledges, "the number of newly qualified teachers joining the teaching profession has been low[5]…class sizes are very different across schools[6]…most teachers have not received all the training they need to cope with responsibilities of teaching[7]"

21. The Action Plan makes important acknowledgements regarding some of the challenges relating to teachers, but it does not give a fair reflection of the working (and remuneration) conditions of teachers. The recent devastating strike action in the public service sector (which has included teachers across the country) over dissatisfaction with their working and living conditions, is a clear example of a major issue which directly affects teaching in our schools.

22. Despite the above, the draft Action Plan notes that "teacher pay has improved over the years"[8] and that the purchasing power of teachers has increased by 40% since 2007.[9] If the DBE is to achieve its goals of attracting new teachers into the profession (goal 14) and striving for a healthy workforce that enjoys job satisfaction (goal 17), then it must first acknowledge that not only are many teachers working in intolerable teaching environments, but also that there is room for major improvement in their current remuneration.

23. The Action Plan does not deal sufficiently with the importance of teacher remuneration. Instead, it focuses on other aspects that influence teacher satisfaction (goal 17). Remuneration of teachers is crucial to teachers' job satisfaction and must be dealt with more comprehensively in the plan.

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[5] Government Gazette, No. 33434, pg 24.
[6] Ibid. pg 25.
[7] Ibid. pg 26.
[8] Ibid. pg 28.
[9] Ibid. pg 25.

Recommendation

24. The Action Plan focuses on the 'key challenge…to reward those teachers who do exceptionally well.' This is an important aspect of improving teaching, but it is equally, if not more, important for the DBE and government to work with the trade unions to develop a better system for negotiating teacher salaries across the board, so as to improve the *average* working conditions of teachers. This would assist in avoiding damaging strike action in the future and will incentivise an increase of new teachers into the profession.

The need for more equal distribution of teachers (post-provisioning model)

25. The unequal distribution of teachers across our public school is a major challenge to our education system and perpetuates inequality in access to quality education. This is a key issue that must be addressed on a pro-poor basis.

26. The draft Action Plan notes that "class sizes are very different across different schools and that around half of South Africa's public schools sit in classes with over 40 learners,"[10] but it also notes that "teaching posts are given to schools more or less in proportion to their enrollments."[11] It is instructive to acknowledge that these schools with overcrowded classrooms are those in impoverished areas.

27. The plan notes the major problem in distribution of teachers, but does not recognise that the current 'post-provisioning model'[12] actually perpetuates this disparity.

28. According to the current post-provisioning model, a privileged former Model-C school will be allocated the same amount of teachers as a poor township school with a similar amount of learners. However, privileged schools are able to charge higher school fees, attract better qualified teachers, 'top-up' teacher's salaries and hire additional teachers. Thus, they are able retain of the best teachers and will have many more teachers than schools with similar

[10] Government Gazette, 33434, pg 25.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Annexure 11 to the Government Notice R 1676 (of 18 December 1998) entitled: "Regulations for the Creation of Educator Posts in a Provincial Department of Education and the Distribution of such posts to the Educational Institutions of such a Department."

enrollments which cannot afford to charge high school fees (or any school fees at all in the case of no-fee schools).

29. The current model, does not account for the amount of additional teachers that privileged schools can hire, or for the fact that most suburban schools attract better qualified teachers. This translates, in real terms, to the government spending more on every child in the suburban schools, than it does on learners in township schools.[13]

30. The draft Action Plan suggests that the policy on the distribution of teaching posts has changed so that "it is clearer to each school how teaching time should be used,"[14] and that government will focus on the implementation of its policy for additional pay for teachers in remote rural areas.

Recommendations

31. The Action Plan should speak to the importance of the need to further adapt the post-provisioning of teaching posts.

32. The number of additional educator posts which are established and funded through SGB-collected funds, in a given school, must be taken into account when the Department allocates posts to schools. Thus, the post-provisioning model should be balanced in favour of poorer schools that are not able to provide teachers above and beyond the posts allocated to them by the Department. This will ensure that the problem of overcrowded classes in township and rural schools can be more adequately and equitably dealt with.

Teacher development

33. The need for far greater teacher development strategies is identified in the draft Action Plan and the DBE has correctly noted that this should be a priority requiring urgent attention.

[13] For more detail on this see 'Equal Education Comment on Draft Regulations Published as General Notice Number 1164'
[14] Government Gazette, No. 33434, pg 26.

34. EE welcomes the commitment to make more teacher training courses available and to support research where teachers are tested to see where gaps are in subject knowledge and teaching skills.

Recommendation

35. While we agree that results of the above studies should not be used to victimise teachers or to impair their dignity, we also believe that a strategy should be developed to use these tests to ensure that problem areas are identified and that teachers are given the necessary opportunities to develop their teaching skills. This can be developed in a manner that still respects the dignity of teachers, while allowing for individual teacher appraisal. Government and the unions must engage with one another on this in order to develop a comprehensive model.

THE NEED TO IMPROVE ACCESS TO BASIC RESOURCES AND SCHOOL INFRASTRUCTURE

Literacy and numeracy levels and general learner performance

36. Goals 1 – 9, which deal with the improvement of average literacy and numeracy levels are important because they deal with crucial foundations for learning.

37. It has already been noted that continued and extended monitoring and testing of literacy and numeracy levels is important, however improving these average levels requires far more than monitoring and testing.

38. The draft Action Plan acknowledges that the importance of the data collected through the monitoring and testing mechanisms will be based on how that data is used. It also recognises that access to learning materials is crucial to achieving these 'output goals' (goals 1-13). Some of these learning materials are dealt with by goals 19 – 23, and later regarding school infrastructure (goal 24).

39. The draft Action Plan sets out clear targets for the improvement of average language and mathematics scores of learners (particularly in the ECD phase) between now and 2025. Yet, despite the acknowledged link between access to teaching and learning resources and improved teaching and learning, the plan does not always provide as clear targets for

improving access to the learning materials. It focuses on providing more specific output goals without providing similar targets for the commensurate educational resource inputs (like libraries, computers and better school infrastructure etc.).

Recommendations

40. It is recommended that clear and specific targets be set for improving access to learning materials, particularly those that will support the development of literacy and numeracy skills. These specific 'educational materials' will be dealt with more specifically under the headings below.

41. These targets may be similar to those contained in goals 1- 9, and may be reviewed from time to time.

School textbooks

42. The draft Action Plan mentions that it will improve access to textbooks, workbooks and other educational materials.

43. It notes that, firstly, "access to text books is insufficiently monitored"[15] and that developing a system to track improvements is required. This must be welcomed. It is clearly insufficient for the DBE to base its estimates of text book shortages through surveys conducted by Stats SA on parents who complain of textbook shortages.[16]

44. A recent nationwide study focusing on barriers children face in accessing and participating in education, conducted by Social Surveys and the Centre for Applied Legal Studies (CALS), found that half of all learners between the ages of 16 and 18 are required to share textbooks with other learners,[17] which is much higher than the 11% referred to in the draft Action Plan.[18]

[15] Ibid. pg 59.
[16] Ibid. pg 30.
[17] Social Surveys-CALS 2009, Access to Education Project. "More than getting through the school gates."
[18] Government Gazette, supra, pg 30.

45. The Action Plan notes that the ultimate aim should be that "every learner has access to at least one textbook per learning area (or subject) that he or she can take home after school, even if at the end of the year the book must be returned to the school."[19]

46. The Action Plan makes some good suggestions for improving access to textbooks. These include having principals promote the re-use of textbooks, and having the DBE continue its efforts to reduce the relatively high price of textbooks.[20]

47. These specific initiatives speak to the two most important challenges affecting access to textbooks: the high price of textbooks and the poor retention of textbooks from year to year. However, the Action Plan does not deal in enough detail with these issues, which affect poor and working class schools most acutely and leave learners at these schools without adequate access to textbooks.

48. South Africa's relatively high price of textbooks, which is noted in the Action Plan,[21] is primarily a result of the current textbook procurement policy. According to the policy all schools choose their own textbooks, which they source from booksellers. Section 21 schools, which control their own finances, pay booksellers directly; while non-Section 21 schools, which do not control their own finances, send book orders to the provincial education department, which then pays booksellers on their behalf.

49. The current procurement policy prevents provincial education departments from using their buying power to drive down the price of textbooks. It does this by making schools act as independent buyers. This breaks government's buying power in the textbook market, and serves to strengthen sellers, who are able to keep the price of textbooks high. If government were to consolidate its buying power – i.e. if provincial education departments purchased textbooks in bulk on behalf of schools – it would be able to drive down the price of textbooks enormously.

50. The second way in which the current procurement policy keeps the price of textbooks high is through the use of booksellers. According to the policy, schools must buy their textbooks

[19] Government Gazette, No. 33434, pg. 59
[20] Ibid pp.59-60
[21] Ibid, pg. 60

from booksellers, rather than publishers directly. This results in textbooks being 30% more expensive. Educational publishers set the recommended retail price for textbooks. They in turn sell them onto booksellers at a 30% discount, who then sell them to schools. This 30% is in effect the booksellers' gross profit.[22] Further, it "is the largest single contributor to the retail price of a book in the educational book value chain."[23] Generally, schools are able to negotiate discounts from booksellers in the region of 10%.[24]

51. In addition to keeping the price of textbooks high and thus reducing access to them, the current procurement policy prevents government from choosing the best available textbooks for every subject and grade. It does this by requiring all schools to choose their own textbooks, the argument being that different schools have different needs. While there is some merit in this argument, it is taken to extremes and blown out of all proportion. By and large, not only can all grade 8 English-language Geography classes use the same Geography textbook, but in fact they *should*. Leaving the decision to each individual teacher is irresponsible and unrealistic, and harks back to the illusions of OBE.

52. The poor retention of textbooks from year to year is the second major challenge affecting access to textbooks. This is a school management challenge, and must be addressed as such. It is therefore not enough to have principals encourage the reuse of textbooks and to encourage learners and parents to look after textbooks, as the Action Plan does. Rather, the core feature of any effort to deal with the poor retention of textbooks should be the establishment of a functioning textbook retention system in every school. This system should be premised on an understanding of textbooks as school assets to be valued and looked after, and promote accountability among learners, teachers and principals in this regard. The DBE should formulate textbook retention policy, support schools with implementation and ensure compliance.

53. Another major challenge affecting access to textbooks is corruption in the procurement process, which is not mentioned in the Action Plan. Yet, "[t]here are widespread and

[22] Genesis Analytics, 2007. "Factors influencing the cost of books in South Africa". p. vii
[23] Ibid. p. 40.
[24] Ibid.

consistent allegations of corruptions in the educational market."[25] Yet the extent of this corruption is unknown. It is important to recognise that this problem arises under the current procurement policy, which makes each school responsible for choosing its own books. This generates thousands of possibilities of corruption – impossible to monitor – between principals, teachers and booksellers. While we are certainly not suggesting that most principals or teachers are corrupt, we do believe that centralised procurement would avoid the potential for such abuse.

Recommendations

54. The DBE should develop better monitoring mechanisms to assess the level of access to textbooks. The Action Plan mentions that this will be done, but does not provide any detail in this regard.

55. The DBE should reform the current textbook procurement policy, which keeps the price of textbooks high and consequently limits access to them, particularly for poor and working-class learners. It also prevents government from choosing the best available textbooks for every subject and grade.

56. It is proposed that this reform transfer the responsibility to choose and buy textbooks from schools to provincial education departments, and that these departments buy textbooks in bulk on behalf of schools. A panel of independent subject experts should be constituted to decide which textbooks are bought. It is further proposed that government buy textbooks directly from publishers, rather than booksellers.

57. The DBE should prioritise the establishment of functioning textbook retention systems in schools. This is a key element in improving access to textbooks, particularly in poor and working-class schools.

58. The DBE should do more to combat corruption in the procurement of textbooks. It should investigate all allegations of corruption and take decisive action in this regard. We suggest that the DBE set up a toll-free hotline to which anyone can call in and report corruption, as

[25] Ibid. See also pp. 67-8.

well as late or non-delivery of textbooks. This can be incorporated under the complaints officer's competency as already suggested in the draft Action Plan.

59. The DBE should engage with Treasury on the feasibility of a VAT exemption on school textbooks. This should take into account the possibility of an exemption on VAT, on a sliding scale, that will take into account socio-economic conditions and relative poverty levels of particular schools.

60. The DBE should also engage with the Department of Trade and Industry on the possibility of lowering the import tariffs on textbooks.

School Libraries

61. Access to school libraries is also another crucial educational resource that is necessary to achieve the learning outcomes set out in the draft Action Plan.

62. Numerous studies have shown that access to functioning school libraries have a major impact on improved learner performance and particularly to improving learners' literacy levels.[26] The DBE notes that "every learner needs access to a library of good books and materials such as newspapers."[27]

63. The draft Action Plan also states that "around 15 000 schools, or over half of all schools, have no library and where schools do have library it is not always sufficient."[28] In fact the government's own statistics show that the problem is far greater than this. The 2009 National Education Information Management System Report (NEIMS) shows that only 8% of public schools (1 837) have functioning libraries, and that 79% (19 239) do not have a school library.[29]

[26] For more on these studies see, Equal Education, "We Can't Afford Not To" available at http://www.equaleducation.org.za/resource_centre_research_reports
[27] Government Gazette, No. 33434, pg 31.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Available at: http://www.education.gov.za/EMIS/emisweb/Neims/school%20infrastructure%20report.pdf

64. The draft Action Plan provides that media centres or libraries will be built in schools and that government will continue "to promote mini-libraries within classrooms, which can assist in giving learners access to materials until the school has a fully equipped library."[30]

65. It is encouraging that the draft Action Plan acknowledges the need for all learners to access library materials and that every school should have a library, but it fails to deal with two crucial issues related to improving access to these materials. Firstly, it fails to provide for librarian-posts and librarian training, which is crucial to providing functioning libraries. The plan does not mention this at all. Secondly, it fails to provide any targets to achieve or monitor progress in the provision of school libraries.

66. Access to school libraries is closely related to need for improvement in the literacy levels of our learners. The draft Action Plan has set targets for improving literacy levels, but it does not provide any clear targets for the provision of school libraries, which is essential to realising the former. It provides that government will monitor the percentage of learners who have access to school libraries and computers,"[31] but it does not do enough to connect this to measuring literacy levels.

67. The draft Action Plan notes that government now has a better reporting system for school infrastructure. Also, it only provides that all schools should be at 'basic functionality' by 2014, and does not provide a target for schools that will be at optimum functionality at that time, (i.e. by 2014).

Recommendations

68. The Action Plan should clearly link the goals of achieving higher literacy rates to the improved provision of school libraries.

69. The Action Plan must also provide targets for the amount of schools it would like to reach 'optimum functionality' by 2014, which should include targets for improving access to school libraries and computer centres. This can be done through the promulgation of national

[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid.

minimum norms and standards, but this does not preclude the Action Plan from detailing broad targets so as to inform the implementation of norms and standards.

70. 'Goal 24,' which deals with school infrastructure, should provide broad targets for implementation if it the Action Plan is to be effective in this regard.

71. The DBE's plans to improve teacher training and improve post provisioning (see paragraphs 19 – 24 above) should include measures that incorporate training and post-provisioning for school librarians. This should include the establishment of new and improved sites of training to staff the school libraries, which must include university training for librarians and library administrators as both degree programmes and short courses.

72. Clear budgets must be provided for the provision of libraries, library materials and the training and remuneration of school librarians. 'Goal 24' mentions that the DBE is looking into better ways to fund school infrastructure. This must be addressed urgently, but the DBE should still set targets for improving school infrastructure so as to guide the existing budget and fiscal capabilities.

73. The Action Plan should also commit to improve and extend on the QUIDS-UP programme to provide shelving, computers and 3 books per learner in every public ordinary school library.

74. Clear policy must be developed, to ensure that library materials in schools are utilised effectively.

Over-emphasis on e-Education as part of short term goals

75. Access to computers and the computer literacy are important factors in today's society.

76. Further, the internet is a useful resource for communication and as an important tool in the learning process.

77. The draft Action Plan makes a number of references to the use of e-Education strategy to deal with particular challenges in the education system. EE welcomes initiatives aimed at improving access to information technology and the development of computer literacy, however, the possible impact of computer technology must be considered in light of the current conditions of limited access to computers and the internet. It is not reasonable to over-emphasis the possible impact of e-Education in the short term, especially for already under-resourced schools in township and rural areas.

78. Many learners, teachers and parents either have limited access, or no access at all, to computers and the internet. The draft Action Plan provides that, as part of its e-Education strategy, government will continue to support the establishment of computer centres in schools. However, the latest NIEMS report shows that currently 77% (18 746) of public schools do not have a computer centre. The situation for parents living in poor communities is worse than that of the learners, with many parents not being computer literate or having easy access to computers. Also, as is acknowledged in the draft Action Plan, many teachers are not computer literate.

79. The draft Action plan proves that e-Education will assist greatly in teacher training through distance education through the use of the internet, but the plan also admits that there is a long way to go in improving teacher's computer literacy.

80. The draft Action Plan provides, correctly, that there should be training for parent members of school SGB's and that this should focus on parents in poorer communities. It goes on to provide that this training should focus on how e-Education makes access to information easier.

Recommendations

81. The Action Plan should also provide more detail on the training it will seek to provide which is *not* done through distance education. Teacher development is an urgent need and requires short, medium and long term measures. 'e-Education' would be best suited as a medium to long term goal, while there is a need to intensify teacher training immediately.

82. Training of parent members of SGB's should include training on e-Education, but should ensure that this training is relevant to the conditions of many parents in poor communities. The training should seek to provide the parents with important skills on school governance and related matters, but should be done so in the manner which is most easily accessible to parents, especially those in poor communities.

83. The same applies for the government's plans to keep parents informed about the amount of funds allocated to their children's school. The draft Action Plan provides that this will be done through publishing these amounts on the internet. This would make it inaccessible to many parents in poor communities. The draft Action Plan should *expressly* provide for alternative means of keeping parents informed which also takes into account the socio-economic conditions of many parents in poor communities.

CONCLUSION

1. On the whole, the draft *Action Plan 2014: towards the realisation of Schooling 2025*, is a progressive attempt to coordinate efforts at addressing the crises that affect our education system. Equal Education supports this initiative.

2. Although this step to develop a long term plan is welcomed, there are particular parts which should be developed further in order to increase its potential impact.

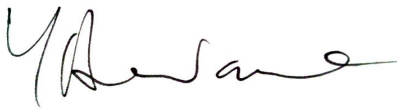
3. Where the draft Action Plan does set targets, it does so clearly. However there are still areas where the Action Plan needs further detail and elaboration. The plan must include more (specific) targets relating to the provision of learning materials (including textbooks, school libraries and computers) and school infrastructure.

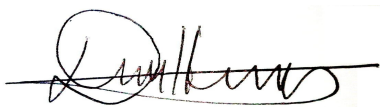
4. These learning and teaching materials are crucial to the improving teaching and learning performance and should thus also be set with more clear targets. Minimum Norms and standards should include targets which should be guided partly by this Action Plan.

We trust that the input above is of assistance and useful in the formulation of *Action Plan 2014: towards the realization of Schooling 2025*. We trust further that the recommendations will be

considered as constructive suggestions for inclusion into the final plan, or as points for further engagement.

Sincerely,





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