

FIXING GAUTENG'S EDUCATION SYSTEM IS VITAL TO SOUTH AFRICA'S SUCCESS

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Abstract

“Despite being the richest province, Gauteng’s students lagged behind some of their counterparts in other provinces when it came to average achievement in reading and literacy. Gauteng is a rich province and it should be doing much better. Its success is also vital to the success of South Africa. The country will not succeed with a failed Gauteng. An excellent education system is a vital ingredient in ensuring a successful Province. The first change that could be made is that there could be increased parental involvement in schools.

There is research evidence that suggests that greater parental and community involvement leads to better educational outcomes. A further way of perhaps looking to improve the educational outcomes of schools is looking into implementing a charter school system. Third, existing Schools that perform well, such as Afrikaans schools, should be strengthened in the Province, rather than undermined. These interventions at cultural and policy level, will ensure a focus on improved educational outcomes rather than the headline grabbing “politicking” around education that we have witnessed from political leaders. ”

Instead of doing the hard work of fixing South Africa's education system, the political leadership in Gauteng focuses on sideshows to capture headlines. Building a foundation for the future of South Africa's children may not get headlines, but it will put the province and country on to a path of sustainable prosperity.

Gauteng is the Shining City on the Hill in the eyes of millions, not just in South Africa, but across the continent and indeed the world. Since George Walker stumbled across what would prove to be the richest gold deposit on Earth, Johannesburg has attracted people looking to make their fortune, or just seeking a better life. The mining village grew to become one of the greatest cities in Africa, with renown well beyond the continent.

Today, Johannesburg is the heart of Gauteng, the richest Province. It is also the richest city in Africa, and accounts for 15% of South Africa's economic output. Combined with the contributions of the executive capital, Pretoria (Tshwane), and South Africa's workshop, Ekurhuleni (East Rand), Gauteng accounts for over a third of total South African economic output. It is no wonder, then, that the Province is a magnet for people not only from South Africa and the rest of the Continent, but also the world. This glitter is tarnished in one key respect. Despite its riches, Gauteng performs dismally in education.

Pupils in Gauteng Province lag behind others on the Continent, and infrastructure leaves much to be desired. Only a third of Gauteng's schools have a laboratory and less than half have a stocked library. Over a fifth also do not have any sports facility. This stands in stark contrast to Gauteng's economic potency. If the province were to stand alone, an independent Gauteng would have the sixth-largest economy in Africa, behind Nigeria, Egypt, Algeria, Angola, and Morocco. On a *per capita* basis, it would rank as the fourth-richest country in Africa, with only Seychelles, Mauritius and Equatorial Guinea boasting per-capita rates higher than South Africa's smallest Province. Despite being – by far – the smallest Province by area, a quarter of South Africa's population (14-million people) live in Gauteng, up from less than 20% in 1996, making it the most populous Province, and this despite having the lowest birth rate of any Province. It also is home to world-class Universities, competitive sports teams, and tourist attractions that other regions can only dream of. Little wonder, then, that people are flocking to Gauteng from around the country and the continent.

Yet, despite these assets, increasing numbers of parents in Gauteng are choosing to send their children to private schools, rather than take their chances in the state system. Enrolment in independent schools in Gauteng between 2000 and 2016 grew from 117,521 to 278,026, or by 137% – in contrast to the 43% growth in the number of pupils in government schools. Over roughly the same period, Gauteng's overall population grew by about 50%. Between 2000 and 2016, the number of independent schools in Gauteng exactly doubled (this is not counting unregistered schools). The number of state schools grew by only 9.3% over this period (although off a much higher base). The only provinces which saw greater growth than Gauteng in the number of independent schools were the Eastern Cape and Limpopo.

Despite being the richest province, Gauteng's students lagged behind some of their counterparts in other provinces when it came to average achievement in reading and literacy. According to an international study, the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), Gauteng's Grade 4s were third in South Africa for their comprehension skills in reading, behind the Western Cape and the Free State. Gauteng's reading score was 343 (500 is considered the international average), slightly higher than South Africa's score of 320. The only other African countries in the PIRLS study were Morocco and Egypt, scoring 358 and 330 respectively. Gauteng has a General Data Protection Regulation *per capita* income nearly three times that of both these countries, yet the literacy scores of the children tested in these three jurisdictions are roughly the same. Something similar is observed when we look at an international test which looks at how well pupils do in maths and science, known as TIMMS. Where the international average was again 500, Gauteng scored 420, outscored by only the Western Cape at 441. South Africa's overall score was 376. The only other African country in the study was Morocco, scoring 377.

This would make one think that Gauteng did fairly well in comparison to our North African rival. At face value, this would seem to be true but Gauteng had a very high variation in pupil scores. About 11% of pupils scored above 550 points, with 3% scoring above 625 (indicating that they were advanced achievers). At the same time, a quarter of pupils scored less than 350. This would imply that Gauteng has something of a "two-speed" education system (not unlike the rest of the country), with a handful of schools providing excellent education, and the vast majority failing our children.

Gauteng is a rich province and it should be doing much better. Its success is also vital to the success of South Africa. The country will not succeed with a failed Gauteng. An excellent education system is a vital ingredient in ensuring a successful Province. But what are the ingredients for this excellent education system?

The first change that could be made is that there could be increased parental involvement in schools. IRR research has shown that increased parental involvement generally [leads](#) to improved educational outcomes. This can be done through strengthening School Governing Bodies (SGBs) and pushing back [against](#) legislation seeking to weaken, rather than strengthen SGBs. At the same time it is important to ensure that people serving on SGBs are well-equipped to deal with the challenges that they face. It is vital that government and civil society work together to ensure that parents serving on SGBs have the necessary skills and tools to help the smooth running of a school. Parents must also be made aware of the importance of SGBs, and attend meetings and vote in elections for these bodies. The education of a child is not the sole responsibility of a school – parents must also be involved.

A further way of perhaps looking to improve the educational outcomes of schools is looking to a charter school system. Here schools are, with the agreement of a government, taken over by a private provider. The private providers have a certain number of key performance indicators to meet, and their contract to run a school can be revoked if they fail to meet these. Although charter schools have been criticised by many, if implemented properly, they can go some way to improving outcomes, especially in schools which have traditionally fared poorly. A pilot project is [underway](#) in the Western Cape and although the results are somewhat mixed, we need innovative thinking in the province to address the crisis in some of our schools. These types of schools could go some way to closing the gap between richer and poorer pupils, and it is something that the province should look at.

Thirdly, Afrikaans schools should be strengthened in the Province, rather than undermined. Afrikaans-medium schools (defined as those that offer Afrikaans Home Language as a subject, and thus includes Afrikaans parallel- and double-medium schools) perform [better](#) on all metrics, compared to schools where English is the medium of instruction. The matric pass mark and University entrance rate are better in Afrikaans schools compared to English schools – by about ten percentage points. Why is this? There are probably three reasons for this.

The first is greater parental involvement by parents in Afrikaans schools. The second is that the poisonous influence of the South African Democratic Teachers' Union (SADTU) is less pronounced in these schools. The third is that teachers in these schools have very good subject knowledge. For example, a study in 2016 found that mathematics teachers in Afrikaans schools scored an average of 97% in the preliminary examination for the subject. These schools should be supported and strengthened, rather than undermined, which certainly seems to be the intention of the MEC of education in Gauteng, Panyaza Lesufi. His attempts to force Hoërskool Overvaal incident earlier this year, where an Afrikaans school was forced by the department to accept English-speaking pupils despite two nearby English-medium schools having space for the pupils, is such an example. Further evidence of a dilution of Afrikaans in Gauteng is that one can no longer select a medium of instruction when applying for a school on the Gauteng government's education portal, implying that one can no longer select Afrikaans as the medium of instruction.

Afrikaans should never be used as a means of being exclusive or of keeping others out of schools where there is space, but nor should Afrikaans-medium schools be undermined. They produce some of the best results in the province and the country, and the MEC should learn from them, rather than seek to ensure that English is the medium of instruction across the province.

In addition, [three-quarters](#) of Gauteng's education budget goes to staffing costs, leaving very little left for infrastructure and other needs. Less of the R45 billion budget needs to go to remuneration – but this will be difficult to do with a national government that is unwilling to take on the unions and reduce staff complements.

And this is the crux of the matter – until the influence of SADTU is tackled state education in South Africa will suffer. Little has been done following the report that SADTU had effectively taken over six of the nine provincial education departments (including Gauteng) with corruption and selling of posts rife.

Fixing the Province's schools will be a difficult, but not impossible task. The Province is well-resourced and has experienced personnel. But difficult decision need to be made, and these should be guided for what would be best for the development of the education system and the economy as well as what would be best for learners, rather than solely political criteria, party interests or the dictates of ideology. For example, an Afrikaans school which provides excellent education while using Afrikaans as a medium of instruction, should be lauded, rather than undermined. Good schools must be supported, rather than weakened while simultaneously doing everything possible to make weaker schools better.

The Department of Education and the MEC must, to use a clichéd expression, ‘think outside of the box’. Issues such as charter schools and increased parental involvement might be anathema to ideologues within the Governing Party but it is no longer feasible to continue doing what has been done for years in the Education system, without much tangible success. The poor outcomes are evident for all to see.

But the most important step that must be taken is that the Unions, and especially the South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU) needs to be confronted. Teachers should be encouraged to be Unionised and to have their rights protected through organisation and collective bargaining. This however cannot come at the expense of the Province’s schoolchildren. A line must be drawn somewhere.

Much can be done to make this province’s public schools the envy of not only the country, but also the rest of the continent, and even further afield. It remains to be seen whether the political leadership has the mettle to put the needs of Gauteng’s schoolchildren first, over and above vested party-political interests.

South Africa will only succeed if Gauteng succeeds and a first step to that goal is to ensure that the school system works and provides high-quality education for all.

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