



In the shadow of apartheid

The South African public school system still lacks the funding needed to help millions of children escape the cycle of poverty. **Anna McAlister** reports.

Democratic elections ended apartheid in South Africa 14 years ago, but the struggle for equality in education continues. Although the governing African National Council funds public schools, those of the affluent are better resourced than the poor, which enrol predominantly black students, says Thobile Ntola, deputy president of the South African Democratic Teachers' Union, which represents 235,000 public school teachers.

In a country which has the largest economy in Africa, some students are still attending lessons in slum buildings or must learn under the shade of trees. Others stay at home because their parents can't afford the fees charged by financially starved public schools.

"Schools in South Africa are still fraught with disparities from the apartheid regime," says Ntola, a former school principal cum agent for change who visited Australia in January for the AEU's federal conference. Those in townships and rural areas are in a desperate state. Some have no library or science laboratory, or even basic facilities. The fees only reinforce socioeconomic inequality, he says.

Adding to the problems is the fact that 11 per cent of South Africa's population of nearly 48 million people are HIV-positive. There are many AIDS orphans. AIDS has robbed schools, often the only institutions to look after disadvantaged children, of qualified teachers. Meanwhile, teachers with little or no training struggle to take over from sick or deceased predecessors.

Furthermore, 45 per cent of adult South Africans are illiterate, says Ntola. "Basic adult education is critical to ensure that all citizens can contribute to the political situation." The illiteracy rate is largely due to the now dismantled Bantu education system, which kept black people in a poorly educated underclass.

South Africa also has 40 per cent unemployment, and many unemployed parents can't afford to send their children to school at all.

High failure rate

Not surprisingly, students in the disadvantaged schools suffer academically. "The failure rate is very high in these institutions compared to the well resourced public schools of the affluent, so most students are not passing with good results," says Ntola. Barred from access to higher education, the cycle of unemployment and poverty continues.

The ANC did promise genuinely sensible funding policies at its 2002 national conference. While these are still only partially implemented, there are some signs of hope. In January, Ntola made a speech to a SADTU conference where he reported that the ANC government had recently pledged enough funding to make 60 per cent of schools fee-free by next year. The government is also launching a scheme to teach reading and writing to 4.7 million adults by 2012.

Fourteen years after Nelson Mandela became president, Ntola says the government is still driven by good intentions. "But it's clear that we can't achieve this vision without addressing our country's political and economic system." ●

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Resources

- SADTU: <http://sadtuo.org.za/portal/>
- New Internationalist's South Africa statistics: www.newint.org/issue265/facts.htm
- Article on South Africa's education crisis: <http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=40991>