

F. KEY FINDINGS

This short but intense investigation into education evaluation and development yielded a wide range of data on the state of the education system in South Africa. Unfortunately, not all this information—the submissions, the interviews, the documentary evidence—can be represented in this Report. The Committee restricts itself therefore only to those findings that have a direct bearing on the Brief: to advise the Minister on the establishment of a National Education Evaluation and Development Unit. In this regard, the Committee tables 14 key findings.

- 1. that there is broad recognition of the crisis in education and the limitations of existing evaluation instruments to, in themselves, remedy the situation*

Throughout the country, in each of the provinces, from government officials, unionists, and teachers alike, the Committee heard the strongest expressions of concern, often in very passionate terms, that there was an indisputable crisis in education, and that it needed to be resolved as a matter of urgency. The unanimity of the response lent courage to this report; indeed, it would be a serious mistake to underestimate the depth and intensity of concern among all education stakeholders.

The crisis in education cannot, of course, be simply linked to the limitations of existing evaluation strategies; nor can the various instruments for monitoring and assessment, in themselves, resolve this crisis. Still, whatever is being done through monitoring and evaluation, it has not shifted education performance in the desired direction at a systemic level.

This means that whatever is proposed by this Committee in terms of an accounting system on the status of schooling, such proposals must be read in the context of systemic collapse of schooling, at least for the bottom half of the education system. This does not mean that schools do not operate on a daily basis with some degree of functionality; it simply means that whatever is happening (or not happening) inside

schools, it has not altered the unmistakeable fact that the academic achievement of learners as a whole does not match the levels of investment in the school system.

This does not mean, also, that there are not pockets of excellence within the school system, among districts, and even within provincial structures. The Committee found striking evidence of exceptionality. Such observations, on the one hand, give cause for hope but on the other hand give cause for concern—since the school system cannot be transformed as a system on the basis of exceptional performance among the few. It is fundamental to the vision of government that all schools succeed and that all learners achieve. But having excellent models of good schools—especially in disadvantaged communities—is a priceless resource when trying to lift the standard and improve the practice of the rest of the education system.

The proposals that follow in this report take full account of the systemic crisis around public schools, and seek to convey a measure of realism about what is possible under such conditions with respect to evaluation and monitoring. At the same time, the proposals convey an urgency in which the significance of monitoring and evaluation under such conditions are clearly spelt out.

- 2. that there is widespread consensus on the need for stronger accountability measures alongside developmental support to be introduced into the school system*

The Committee finds that the present system for school accountability is weak, uneven and limited in scope. The accountability system is weak because of a pervasive culture of resistance to strong measures of accountability within schools. The deep negativity towards the apartheid inspection system should not be ignored in the way government crafts a new and comprehensive system of accountability touching all schools.

Stakeholders interviewed testified readily to resistance among organized teachers to classroom visits and observation by officials from the provincial departments of education. The Committee found that in some provinces, and in some districts of other provinces, such external observation was allowed and sometimes even welcomed. Often

the nature of local school politics and the skills of a particular department official could make access to classrooms easier or more difficult. But what this means is that in terms of access to schools and classrooms, there is considerable unevenness in the national system.

The Committee also found that while teachers were often singled out for attention in public and media criticism of failing schools, the accountability net stretches wider than individual teachers. The Committee heard harrowing stories of incompetent and incapacitated district officials. The Committee heard repeated stories of the lack of coordination of support at the level of provinces. The Committee also heard of the confusion generated by the plethora of policies that placed heavier and heavier administrative demands on teachers that drew professionals away from the classroom into never-ending paperwork.

What this means is that proposals for new systems of accountability must of necessity account for performance at all levels from the teacher, to the principal, to the governors, to the district, provincial and national department authorities. While the teacher is undoubtedly the most important influence on learning in the classroom, the extent to which the act of teaching is nested within other supporting contexts cannot be overstated.

The current system for accountability relies heavily on terminal examinations, in the case of Grade 12 learners, and on systemic evaluation which targets only selected grades (3, 5 and 9) and that on a sampling basis i.e. it is not an account of every school, classroom and learner. A national system of accountability including learner assessment data but also other kinds of data (such as teacher knowledge and classroom support) must form part of the proposed comprehensive system for monitoring and evaluation of schools.

3. *that there is reluctance in some quarters to change existing monitoring and evaluation initiatives not only because of the potential disruption but also because recent measures (such as IQMS) have not yet had enough time for expression in educational practice*

The Committee found a pervasive sense of reform fatigue among South African teachers. Whether it was curriculum change or assessment reform or new educator regulations, teachers were tired of “yet another” round of changes to their work.

This sense of being overwhelmed by never-ending external demands on their work predisposes teachers towards apathy, at best, and resentment, at worst, in the light of what is interpreted as another round of changes through NEEDU. Teachers felt strongly that teaching time was eroded by the distractions of countless policy changes.

In this context, there was a need expressed that existing and still relatively new measures, such as the IQMS, be allowed to run its course in all schools before changing the earlier attempt to streamline three previous reforms (DAS, PM and WSE) into a single measurement instrument. In other words, to introduce another form of appraisal just as teachers were becoming familiar with IQMS would send the wrong signal to practitioners.

In this respect it was clear to the Committee that despite firmly expressed views on the limitations of IQMS, this policy enjoyed political support through the ELRC agreement, and that this consensus process had to be taken into account. Moreover, it appears that in some provinces the core staff working with schools on IQMS was establishing some operational rhythms in the implementation and was understandably reluctant to change again.

It would not complete the picture, though, if the Committee did not also report confusion and incapacity in other provinces where IQMS has hardly got off the ground. In fact, it is reported that the recently appointed “moderators,” whose work it is to judge the adequacy of implementation, have been able to visit more schools in certain provinces than the IQMS district/circuit personnel.

The judgment of this Committee is that there is no evidence, at this point, that IQMS in its present form will be able to serve as an effective mechanism for accountability; on the other hand, there might be a case for continuance with further refinement and refocusing of IQMS with particular attention to learning achievements. This will also offer some confidence to teachers and officials concerned about the withdrawal and replacement of IQMS.

4. that there is considerable variation in the capacity of provinces and schools for the interpretation and implementation of existing evaluation and development measures

For historical reasons that are well-understood, the better resourced provinces are better able to *technically* administer Whole School Evaluation, IQMS and other monitoring and evaluation policy instruments. However, the technical capacity to administer national policy does not necessarily translate into the managerial capacity to bring about change and improvement in all schools.

Still, the Committee was on the one hand impressed with the craft and capacity available in some provinces, the strengths of the professional teams, the quality of the documentation, the institutionalization of policy processes, the strategic thinking orientation of the leadership in the bureaucracy, the intellectual scrutiny applied to school evaluation and teacher support, and the general dedication of key staff.

The Committee was on the other hand concerned about the lack of skill and capacity in other provinces, the weakness and uncertainty among designated staff, the incomplete and inadequate documentation, the confusion about policy and planning processes, the crisis management ethos in the department, the lack of opportunities to stand back from operational work, and the sense of lethargy in parts of the system.

It is clear to the Committee that the now overused adage used to criticize policy positions and planning strategies—that one-size fits all—applies not only at the level of schools but also at the level of districts and provinces. In order to attain uniformity of