



The trouble with the fee-exemption system at schools

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It costs more to send a child to some of South Africa's elite private schools than it does to cover tuition at many universities. This is just one reason among many that it's time for a commission on school funding. The school fee system also needs urgent attention; not least because it is hardening the education system into a class-divided order.

South Africa is thinking about overhauling higher education funding. This process should be accompanied by a major re-look at the school funding and fee exemption system.

A fee-exemption system was initiated in 1996 and culminated in some schools being declared entirely fee-free from 2006 — paradoxically allowing poverty to continue at one end of the scale and affluence to persist at another.

No-fee schools

The Department of Basic Education is proud of the fact that, in 2016, just over 60% of children do not pay school fees. This system was introduced after a long battle by NGOs in the nineties against fees,

particularly those charged to people in poor areas.

The problem is that these fee-exempt schools are not well-resourced. South African government spending on education compares favourably with other developing and middle-income countries. But this does not necessarily translate into either adequate outcomes or resourcing of schools.

On average, about 80% of provincial budgets are spent on teacher salaries, with some spending more and some less. This leaves about 20% or less for spending on maintenance, textbooks and other necessary resources.

It is no accident that more broken windows and toilets are found at schools in the poorer provinces than in wealthier parts of the country. There is simply not enough in the non-personnel allocation to schools to shift spending patterns. And there is little provision to deal with poor management of the meagre resources that are allocated.

The changing nature of suburban schools

Increasingly, poor parents — particularly

from urban areas like Johannesburg, Cape Town, Durban and Pietermaritzburg — try to send their children to schools in well-off suburbs.

Schools receive more or less government funding depending on the socioeconomic status of their surrounding communities. So, a school in an established suburb, like Durban's Glenwood, will get less money than one in a poor township such as Umlazi. But children from Umlazi can attend school in Glenwood, creating a disjuncture between the social class of the area in which the school is located and the children attending it.

Since resources are allocated in such a way that schools in poorer areas get more, and those in richer areas get less, unexpected anomalies have arisen.

Educational statistics have not kept pace with these changes in suburbs and the nature of schools in them. Research shows that many such schools receive less than they should if their pupils' parents' income levels were taken into account.

Poor parents lack power

The chasm between whether schools are fee-paying or not is being widened by

schools' practices and assumptions that reinforce admission on the basis of the ability to pay.

Legally, no child can be excluded if the parents are unable to pay school fees. Children in fee-paying schools are still eligible for total, partial, or conditional exemption from fees. It is the duty of the principal and school governing body to apprise parents of their liability for fees unless they have been exempted.

But often fee-paying schools don't want to accept children who cannot pay. They simply don't tell parents that they're eligible for an exemption. In some cases, this reluctance is spurred by provincial governments that don't compensate schools for exempted pupils.

Need to revisit school funding model

An argument can be made that if fees should fall anywhere, it should be in schools first. There is enough evidence that the system is not working as it should across all schools and needs a fundamental rethink. — The Conversation (<https://theconversation.com>).

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