



Pestalozzi Trust (IT6577/98)
die regsfonds vir tuisonderwys
the legal defence fund for home education

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Attention Ms N Tom

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4th August 2009

Dear Sir or Madam

Public comments on strengthening the NCS

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the improvement of education in South Africa.

Attached, please find the response of the Pestalozzi Trust to your kind invitation to comment on strengthening the National Curriculum Statement for Grades 4 to 12.

Leendert van Oostrum
(Executive Officer)

CALL FOR COMMENTS: STRENGTHENING THE NATIONAL CURRICULUM
STATEMENT GRADES 4 TO 12

RESPONSE BY THE PESTALOZZI TRUST

4th August 2009

1. Introduction

The Pestalozzi Trust is pleased to have the opportunity to make inputs into perhaps one of the most important and most urgent issues in South African society at this time.

We believe that the Trust is well placed to contribute from a viewpoint that may not be generally available to other role players, for the following reasons:

- a) The Trust is not directly involved in the day-to-day administration of the curriculum. We are, therefore able to view the situation somewhat objectively.
- b) The Trust receives thousands of telephone calls and personal communications every year from parents, teachers and even learners who have “given up” on the public school system as well as the formal independent schools, and who are searching for ways to get or give education that “works”.
- c) The Trust is continually being called upon to help individuals and schools who are being overwhelmed by the demands of the NCS and who are looking for alternatives.

2. General

Legal status of the NCS. In the first place, it is necessary to point out that the NCS has, in all the years that it is being implemented, not yet been lawfully promulgated in accordance with the relevant provisions of the South African Schools Act (84 of 1996 as amended).

This means that the implementation of the NCS is on shaky ground, being vulnerable to challenge in court. If, as may be expected, the implementation of the NCS is found to be ultra vires, it also makes the Minister and all education officials liable to being sued for damages in their personal capacity, their actions not being mandated by law. This is particularly relevant in view of the extraordinary financial and other burdens that the system places on schools, communities, families and other role players in education.

In addition, the legal advice we received indicates that the imposition of the on private education NCS is unconstitutional on several counts.

This, likewise, means that the minister and education officials may be held personally accountable for imposing on private education burdens that the law does not mandate them to impose.

In the case of Grades 10 to 12, the imposition of the NCS has made it almost impossible for private candidates to obtain the National Senior Certificate. Until 2007, private candidates could prepare themselves for the examination using their own resources and such resources that they could obtain and afford. It was possible to

prepare for the “matric” examination, sit for it and obtain the certificate at a cost of about two thousand Rand or less, counting exam fees, books and even some private tuition.

Now, only candidates registered with accredited “institutions” may enter for the examination. The only accredited “institutions” providing for private candidates are private organizations – no state or even state funded organizations make provision for private candidates.

The “cost” of obtaining the NCS as a private candidate has now rising to the region of thirty thousand Rand. This compares directly with the cost of a Bachelor’s degree through UNISA.

The implementation strategy for the NCS has, therefore, placed a National Senior Certificate beyond the reach of the very people who should be encouraged to improve their qualifications – hundreds of thousands of adults, out of school youth, prisoners and home learners.

3. Specific concerns

As stated, the Trust meets, in course of its work, thousands of refugees from the public school system and even from private schools every year. The ones we encounter form a small fraction of the many teachers and learners who abandon their attempts to provide or obtain a significant education within the structures governed by the NCS.

The children of the elite and middle class end up in private schools (with resources to carry the burden of the NCS) and home education (where the NCS is almost universally ignored). The children of the poor, on the other hand, end up on the streets where they swell the numbers of the unemployed and unemployable.

From the understanding that we have developed of the situation, this is caused by the following:

- a) The NCS has, in reality, moved away completely from an outcomes based approach to a system governed by inputs and processes. The term “outcomes” is still heard in abundance, but it has lost all meaning that may relate to knowledge, skills and attitudes need to function in the society and economy of 21st century South Africa.

This is confirmed by reports from universities, business and concerned commentators in the media. The alumni of the NCS are dismally unprepared for further education and for the workplace.

- b) Instead, the implementation of the NCS has created a complex bureaucratic machine designed more to monitor whether teachers are working than to ensure that children are learning.

Given the heavily unionised condition of the teaching profession this is understandable. Education departments need to be able to monitor and control almost every aspect of the teaching industry in order to justify itself in labour conflicts. However, this comes at a cost that has become fatal to education itself.

Under the implementation of the NCS, the validity of education no longer relies on the professional integrity and professional judgement of the professional teacher, but on the collection and processing of vast amounts of detailed “evidence”. Red tape has replaced judgment.

And this red tape is horrendously expensive. The education budget devours vast amounts of state revenue – which comes from the pockets of the people. Even the poorest of the poor contribute at least 14% of the money they do spend, to the coffers of government.

It overloads teachers with purely administrative tasks that are educationally unproductive to the extent that a very large proportion of teachers are demotivated, suffer from stress related conditions, and would leave education if they could. And many do.

Only rich schools have the resources to lighten the administrative burden on teachers, and only in these schools we still find some education although even here there are serious concerns.

In poor schools teachers are completely overwhelmed by the burden and, if they lose all motivation and interest in their hopeless situation, are lambasted for being lazy and uncommitted by the very agents responsible for their condition – ministers, politicians and senior officials.

The most deleterious effect of the abuse of the NCS as a monitoring mechanism, however, is the effect that it has on the children.

In rich schools children are mostly overloaded to an extent that is seriously concerning. Not with work that produces skills, knowledge and attitudes that will stand them in good stead, but with generating “evidence” that they have been kept busy. There is almost universal consensus among teachers, parents and learners whom we have consulted that children learn nothing or very little that is of any value from most of the work that they do.

In most poor schools, on the other hand, children do nothing. They and the teachers have abandoned all hope of making the system work.

4. Recommendations

The Trust is aware of the almost universal consensus that school systems are in serious decline worldwide. The nineteenth century institutions (that schools still are) do not work and the twentieth century solutions have failed.

Yes, South African learners perform very poorly when compared to those in other countries, including developing countries much poorer than South Africa. But that does not mean that other countries have good education. The deterioration of education is a matter of primary concern around the world.

There is no one “system” that consistently meets the demands that the twenty-first century places on education.

This means that governments, their planners and officials do not have the answers. “Strengthening the NCS”, fixing it and fiddling with it is not going to help. Government will be compelled to enlist the help of the people in solving the problem. This includes:

- a) Restoring trust. Restoring the trust in the integrity and judgment of teachers, guided by competent and experienced principals, to do the best for the children in their charge according to their professional insights. Restoring trust in parents to act in the best interest of their children in choosing the kind of education that their children will receive.
- b) Cessation of the abuse of the education system as an instrument of ideological indoctrination by the governing party. This project is blatantly advertised in the policy documents of that party and manifests prominently in the curriculum, in learning materials and in examination papers at all levels of education.
- c) Cessation of the programme to use the curriculum as a control mechanism to monitor teachers and to second guess them at every turn.
- d) Encouraging civil society to provide education of all kinds and to experiment with alternative solutions to the problem of educating the next generation. This includes removing bureaucratic obstacles and burdens that discourage the provision of alternative education options for children and young people.