

HOW DOES ONE CHANGE A SCHOOL?

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I HAVE always pondered the question of how one changes a school.

Is it done from the bottom up, where all teachers have a say and determine the direction of the school, or is it determined mainly by the person in charge of the school?

Obviously the school is controlled by a plethora of bureaucrats ranging from circuit managers to regional directors to provincial heads of education to the national minister of basic education who is attached to the ruling party.

How do schools navigate successfully through all the bureaucracy?

In an ideal world where politicians and bureaucrats are out-of-the-box thinkers and fair, with an open progressive agenda, schools to my mind would flourish.

This not being so, how do schools navigate through all this bureaucracy and become schools of excellence?

Many people who have read my columns will know by now that I believe education is not neutral, and is also political.

My understanding of political is to be fair and to address the injustices in society.

In teaching, we have a wonderful opportunity to instil into our students a sense of justice and to work towards a society that treats all its citizens in a respectable, caring way.

Teachers are at different stages in their development.

We have the teacher out of university with the latest ideas and theories about education. Enthusiastic and willing to bring about change.

We have teachers who have taught for years and are not open to change and will resist positive change.

We have many principals who are tired of bureaucracy and are just waiting to retire, receive their lump sums and ride into the sunset.

I have watched and read with interests how school leaders and teachers have reacted to the Covid-19 crisis.

Initially, when schools were opened from June 1, I saw many teachers (very few principals) staging placard demonstrations in front of their schools and in highly visible main roads asking the Education Department to close schools to protect the students.

To the credit of the president, he later closed schools for a month to curb the pandemic.

The WCED charged a teacher at Fairmount Secondary School, Ms Loren Arries, for allegedly inciting a school community in the southern suburbs to not send their children to school, to combat the virus.

She was fired by the principal and therefore WCED could not take action against her. This sends shock waves through the teaching community.

A very principled principal, Mr Wesley Neumann, had to go to court to stop a disciplinary hearing against him by a very kragdadige WCED in the form of Mr Brian Schreuder, whose position has been questioned by the Public Services Commission.

I believe in the present situation in South Africa only progressive principals, supported by progressive teachers, can save the situation for the majority of students in the country.

The progressive principal must do the following:

- Make it clear to students that they have the potential to excel.
- Fight openly with the Education Department and inform the press about the physical conditions at schools.
- Offer as many subjects at schools as possible. More art subjects should be introduced.
- Fight for a ratio of 30 students to one teacher. The country has the resources to do this.
- Principals to leave principal organisations (they serve no progressive purpose – where are they when there are crises in education?)

Think about it; have you read any statements from principal organisations during this time? Their mouths are full.

Principals should consider themselves as ordinary teachers and fight alongside teachers.

The one thing Covid-19 has done is to expose the stark inequalities in education.

I am not sorry that, as a teacher, I spoke out against injustice.

My advice to teachers is to try it. It is a liberating experience. I dedicate this article to a principled principal, Dr Victor Ritchie (former principal of Harold Cressy High), who turns 90 today.

I thank you, Dr Ritchie, for your great service to education.