

# CSIS AFRICA NOTES

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## Reconstructing Education for a New South Africa

by Bruce McKenney

One of the many striking changes taking place in South Africa is that township youth are beginning to view education as a fundamental need that should not be used as a political tool. "Inkululeko ngoku, i-degree ngomso!"—the Xhosa slogan calling for "liberation now, education later" that inspired school boycotts in the 1980s—is rarely heard in 1991.

Although the African National Congress formally rejected the 1980s concept of liberation before education, it gave tacit support to the student boycotts of that era by designating schools as a "primary site of struggle." In early 1991, in contrast, the ANC joined with the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC), the Azanian People's Organization (AZAPO), and the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) in calling for all children to make this year "a memorable one for serious learning free of disruptions and school boycotts." The organizations were largely reacting to the worst-ever results for blacks on the matriculation examinations that secondary school students must pass in order to qualify for university entrance. While the overall number of matric certificates issued to blacks has continued to grow over the years (from 20,562 in 1980 to 175,963 in 1990) due to a high population growth rate and increased access to schooling, only 40.7 percent of black students managed to pass the matric examination in 1990, as compared to a pass rate of 51 percent a decade earlier.

Thousands of pupils heeded the political organizations' unified call for a return to the classroom. Indeed, the appeal was so successful that numbers in black secondary schools rose by almost 20 percent. This turnaround created a new crisis. Already bursting at the seams, the overcrowded township schools could not accommodate the tremendous influx of new pupils. The result has been more disruptions, student boycotts, and teacher strikes. At a primary school in Khayelitsha, a township of Cape Town, pupils began the 1991 year with no books or desks and practiced their writing in a thin layer of sand spread out on the concrete floor. These developments warrant an attempt to assess longer-term trends and prospects.



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### The Legacy of Apartheid Education

In the decades that South Africa's learning tree has been entangled with the politics of apartheid, the Bantu education system has de-emphasized English, mathematics, and science in favor of an ethnic cultural focus. In effect, the racially compartmentalized system offered black South Africans an inferior, pretechnological education that worked all too successfully to keep them out of skilled employment fields. It is estimated that approximately 16 percent of black pupils who entered primary school in 1991 may be expected to reach their final year of secondary school, while the corresponding figure for white pupils is 82 percent. According to educationists across the political spectrum, including the government ministers in charge of the stratified education system, the crisis caused by apartheid education will take at least a generation to redress. (For other historical dimensions of apartheid education, see "Black Education in South Africa: Key or Chimera?" by John A. Marcum, *CSIS Africa Notes* no. 41, April 1985.)

The education crisis may have reached nightmarish proportions, but there is reason for guarded optimism. The release of Nelson Mandela, the unbanning of political organizations, and the scrapping of most of the legal pillars of apartheid have resulted in an unprecedented atmosphere of genuine negotiation. Rhetoric is being replaced by pragmatism among all the major interest groups. Instead of continuing to treat education as a political football, almost everyone involved is working to depoliticize the issue in order to encourage a return to schools and disciplined learning.

### The Cost Factor

Although political organizations and educationists maintain their pressure on the government to equalize spending for black and white schooling, all sides recognize that it will take more than a budget increase to solve the pervasive problems left by the legacy of Bantu education. John Samuels, the ANC's education director, acknowledges that there will be "no miraculous transformation; restoring the learning culture takes time." Equal funding would require annual expenditures amounting to 40 percent of the current central budget.

In 1986, then-Minister of National Education (and now State President) F.W. de Klerk launched a 10-year plan aimed at providing parity in education funding, but it had to be canceled three years later due to a lack of funds. In 1990-1991, government expenditure on education rose 16.1 percent, just ahead of the 15 percent inflation rate, and education accounted for 17.5 percent of the total budget. The budget for the Department of Education and Training, which controls funding for black schools (excluding the four "independent national states" and six "self-governing territories") was increased by 21.9 percent. For 1991-1992, spending on education will take up 18.5 percent of the budget, the largest single item. Although black and white education remain grossly unequal, steady progress is being made. In 1990-1991, 3.8 times as much

was spent on each white pupil as on each black pupil, whereas a decade ago the disparity was 10 to 1.

### The Bureaucratic Complexities

The administrative structure of South Africa's education system has been dubbed a bureaucratic monster for good reason. There are 19 separate departments of education—5 for white education, 1 each for so-called Coloured and Indian education, 11 for black education (in South Africa proper and each of the 10 "homelands"), and an umbrella department to control the purse strings and set the norms and standards for the other 18.

For years the ANC and other antiapartheid organizations have been demanding that these bureaucratic structures based on ethnic divisions be scrapped. The Anglo American Corporation mining conglomerate has recently joined in the call for a unitary, nonracial education system. The government has agreed in principle that a single nonracial education system is necessary, but it continues to speak in terms of an educational model that allows for classroom composition to "accommodate cultural and language diversity."

In sum, broad consensus seems to have developed on the need to shift to a single education system, but there is not yet agreement on how to get there. In the short term, the government would prefer to continue to address the imbalances within the existing framework, gradually working toward equal provision of education for all students, irrespective of the particular department under which they fall. Instead of scrapping the existing administrative structures immediately, the plan appears to be to begin by bringing the currently divergent "norms and standards" regarding syllabi, exams, and teacher-pupil ratios in line with each other. Professor Johan Muller of the Education Policy Unit at the

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University of Cape Town summarizes the dilemma: "The government knows it needs one education department, but there are such different norms for everything—both in terms of facilities and variable financing—and the government knows it will have to have one set of norms in order to have one department."

The philosophy of separate education is cemented in the Republic of South Africa Constitution Act of 1983 (which sets forth the culturally segregating concept of "own affairs" and defines education at all levels as an "own affair"). The current position of the government is that the education system can be radically changed only when agreement is reached on a new constitution. But the reasons for the reluctance to undertake drastic restructuring go beyond a lack of funds or the need to await a future constitution. The National Party government is aware that it stands to lose the support of much of its white constituency if white educational standards are perceived to be eroding due to a move to a unified education system.

### **The Search for a New Model**

In February 1991, President de Klerk, Nelson Mandela, and a group of leading educationists met to discuss the black education situation. Although no clear policy goals came out of the meeting, the parties were in general agreement on the extent of the crisis and the need for a new centralized nonracial system. The makeup of this gathering underscored the government's recognition that no new education system will be considered legitimate unless all sides participate in creating it. The noticeable absence of political rhetoric about the subject since the meeting is one indicator that the search for a new education model has begun in earnest.

One of the major challenges now facing policymakers is how to overcome the inefficiency of the diffuse educational bureaucracy. For decades, the 19 education departments have barely communicated. A surplus in one department cannot readily be transferred to another needier department. While some black departments are experiencing severe shortages of teachers and facilities, white departments have a relatively stable pupil population and spare capacity. Assuming a pupil-to-teacher ratio of 30 to 1, white departments are reported to have a 37 percent surplus of teachers while black departments function at more than a 50 percent deficit. The government estimates that at the beginning of 1991 there were 164,009 empty places in white primary and secondary schools.

Instead of transferring black students to empty white facilities or opening them up to all races, the government has in the past customarily closed down underutilized schools. In 1990, in an effort to address the underutilization problem, a plan was introduced that allows a white school to open enrollment to all races if a voting majority of 72 percent can be achieved in a poll of at least 80 percent of the students' parents. The plan was criticized by liberal-minded whites for requiring an

exceedingly high "yes" vote, while right-wing groups protested the policy as a breach of the constitution undertaken without consulting the (white) electorate.

Thus far, approximately 10 percent of white schools have managed to attain the necessary vote to be declared "open." This surprisingly high number has encouraged the de Klerk government to take some significant steps toward opening up the education system further. White teacher training colleges and technikons (tertiary polytechnic institutions providing job-oriented instruction in applied sciences, technology, and related skills) have now been given the power to open their doors to all races, and parliament has passed a Universities Amendment Bill that formally abolishes the racial quota system for university admissions. (In practice, several universities had been ignoring the quota system for years.)

The most important policy shift came in response to an outcry over the closing (on grounds of their underutilization) of 47 white schools with 12,032 places and five white teacher training colleges. The closings were viewed as a colossal waste of resources and as a slap in the face to black education administrators struggling to cope with enormous backlogs of students. In August a dramatic turnabout occurred when the two cabinet-level education ministers announced that underutilized schools would no longer be closed down. Instead, allowances would be made for "the cost-free and expeditious transfer of underutilized schools to other departments." Although the change in government policy was welcomed as a solid step toward redressing the backlogs in black education, the shifting of schools from one racially defined department to another was criticized as a continuation of an "own affairs" approach.

### **Some Longer-Term Recommendations**

After a year of analysis, a government-commissioned working group released its Education Renewal Strategy (ERS) in June 1991. Although the group was created to investigate short- and medium-term managerial solutions to some of the most pressing problems, the ERS discussion document makes several long-term proposals as well. It recommends nonracial regional authorities, equal educational opportunities for all, free as well as compulsory education for all South Africans up to Standard Five (the equivalent of the seventh grade in the United States), and a single new education department for all races that would make "satisfactory allowances for the accommodation of diversity."

Opponents of the ERS plan argue that the education system needs to be reconstructed, not "renewed." Most of the criticism has been directed at the ambiguous nature of the ERS phrase "accommodation of diversity." Opposition groups worry that the ERS plan, rather than promoting a sensible tolerance of different opinions, may be a subtle maneuver to sidestep meaningful change. They note that the government historically has replaced apartheid policies that came under serious pressure with deceptively repackaged but essentially similar programs,

justifying the “new” policies by pointing to South Africa’s indisputable cultural and lingual diversity.

The ERS has also been criticized for recommending only that education be free and compulsory through Standard Five. The ANC-aligned National Education Coordinating Committee (NECC) charges that this “reform” would replace formal racial divisions with a kind of de facto economic apartheid, because many blacks would be unable to afford a general education beyond Standard Five.

### **Education as an Economic Priority**

A related criticism of current education reform programs is that they are not yet sufficiently attentive to South Africa’s economic needs. As Minister of National (overall) Education Louis Pienaar recently phrased it, “we’re producing square pegs for round holes.” There is agreement that the number of people receiving technical education is far too small to overcome South Africa’s worsening skills shortage. Among the consequences of Bantu education’s de-emphasis of mathematics and physical science is the fact that less than 1 percent of tertiary-level black students go on to obtain a technical or vocational education. Given the likelihood that the annual GNP growth rate will be around 2 percent, the South African Institute of Race Relations estimates that there will be a shortage of approximately 200,000 workers with a degree, diploma, or comparable skills by the year 2000.

As of 1991, for all races combined, there are seven university students for every two technikon students. Some economists believe that the ratio should be closer to one-to-one if South Africa is to overcome its skills shortage. The Education Renewal Strategy suggests placing a far greater emphasis on vocational education in the primary and secondary school curricula, paying higher salaries to math and science teachers, and making it easier for students to transfer between universities and technikons.

### **Can the “Lost Generation” Be Reclaimed?**

Although encouraging students to follow vocational study programs may help South Africa redress its skills shortage in the future, there is an immediate need to develop strategies for saving the country’s “lost generation”—the black students who were of school age during the chaos of the post-Soweto uprising era. Since 1980, open universities and several technikons have sought to help educationally disadvantaged students make the transition from secondary to tertiary education.

One such effort undertaken by several universities is the Academic Support Program (ASP), which facilitates the entry of students who have passed the matric examination required for university admission but have various educational gaps. Some ASP students are required to undertake a pre-university year of bridging courses, while others are provided with supplementary courses during their first year. For example, physical science students are given the opportunity to develop

laboratory skills, while humanities students focus on critical reading skills, essay writing, and study methods.

Although the program has been successful at improving the first-year pass rate at universities, there has been little change thus far in the number of black students who graduate. When the support ends in the second year, the pass rate begins to decline. Students criticize the high cost of an extra pre-university year in the ASP and the stigma attached to being selected for remedial academic support. Proponents of academic support believe that the program needs to be expanded to the second and third years of university in order to make a real difference in the number of black graduates, but the resources for this expansion do not exist. Until the Department of National Education acknowledges that academic support is essential, these programs will continue to depend solely upon nongovernmental financial sponsorship.

Although clearly a step in the right direction, the academic support programs do not address the question of the large number of students who do not meet the requirements for university entrance, but seek to be brought up to the level of “matric.” The ERS has suggested the creation of “edukons,” quasi-community colleges that would offer bridging courses to universities and technikons for students who have had inferior schooling. (Whereas about 30 out of 1,000 white students go on to attend university, the figure for black students is approximately 3 per 1,000.)

South African educationists praise the U.S. community college system for its vocationally focused curricula and its well-designed transfer programs that enable disadvantaged students to move from community college to university level. At the same time, however, South African educationists harbor fears that universities might use the community colleges as dumping grounds for ill-prepared students rather than investing more in their own academic support programs, thus perpetuating the underrepresentation of blacks at the university level.

### **The “People’s Education” Pioneers**

Access to university education has been a hotly debated issue ever since several of the traditionally white universities, defying government policy, began in 1985 to accept significant numbers of black students. This change in admissions policy created a situation where universities were flooded with applicants meeting the minimum matriculation requirements for university study. To deal with the crunch, the pioneering white universities raised admission requirements as a means of limiting the number of incoming students to a capacity level. Proponents of “people’s education”—the slogan that can be seen on T-shirts on the campuses of universities throughout South Africa—acknowledged that there are good educational arguments for limiting the growth of student numbers by raising the admissions requirements, but rejected the timing of the new admissions policy. Although vaguely defined, “people’s education” is an attempt to conceptualize education in a

postapartheid era in terms of the goals of the ANC Freedom Charter. In essence, the call is for traditionally white universities to be reformed and for educational opportunities to be redistributed.

"People's education" institutions, such as the formerly "Coloured" University of the Western Cape, initially undertook after 1985 to accept any student who met the minimum statutory requirements for admission, despite the enormous strains the policy placed upon the university. Between 1986 and 1990, the UWC student population shot up from just 6,700 to 12,400. By 1988, the open-door admissions policy was causing unmanageable overcrowding and severely straining the university's resources. A new admissions policy is designed to limit student intake while ensuring (through consideration of applicants' matriculation scores, gender, population group classification, geographical origin, and social class) that each incoming class is representative of the general population. Rector Jakes Gerwel admits that the system is not perfect, but he believes it represents the one attempt by a South African university to develop an admissions policy that is both socially and ethically defensible.

The traditionally white universities have adopted policies of growth keyed to the limits of the physical, human, and financial resources of each institution. Despite the raising of admission requirements, the student population at the University of Cape Town has increased from 12,393 in 1986 to 14,393 in 1991, and black enrollment has grown during the same period from 16.4 percent to 29.3 percent of the student body. Although admission is primarily based on matriculation results, UCT has established an Alternative Admissions Research Program (AARP) to help devise more effective admissions criteria for disadvantaged students. An independent entrance test offered in many city centers to an increasing number of black Standard 10 pupils is one of the innovations developed thus far. Based upon the independent test scores, AARP recommends some black students who would otherwise not be eligible for admission.

Recent official moves to open some white schools and universities to all races have spurred abrasive debate over standards. The UCT administration bristles at the idea of lowering standards, claiming that its traditionally high standards are essential for South Africa to remain a competitive nation in the world economy. Professor Michael Ashley, dean of the Faculty of Education, summarized the UCT view in an interview published in *The Argus* in October 1990: "If white education standards are reasonably satisfactory, then they should be maintained, and as many other people from historically separate sectors as possible should be brought up to those levels."

The University of the Western Cape's stance on the maintenance of standards is somewhat more ambiguous. As its admissions policy illustrates, UWC is accelerating its efforts to become more representative of the population at large. This does not mean, Rector Gerwel

makes clear, that standards will be allowed to erode to a point where the university becomes a "glorified community college."

The political debate over precisely what standards are suitable for each level of education centers on the issue of access. Educationists fear that the maintenance of present standards in a future system would mean the continued exclusion of a disproportionate number of blacks from higher education, but that the alternative of diluting standards would ultimately lead to a mass of poorly qualified, alienated graduates and a nation ill-equipped to compete with the rest of the world.

### Looking Ahead

An air of tolerance, reconciliation, and debate pervades campuses as South Africa moves toward 1992. Arguments continue between proponents of "people's education" and those favoring a more traditional academic approach, but there is an increasing acceptance that both concepts have a place in a future education system. Among student organizations, historically a good indicator of political trends in South Africa, the current trend is nonconfrontational. At student protest marches, the tear gas, police charges, and unpredictable violence of the 1980s have been replaced by unprecedented peaceful dialogue between student protest leaders and the police.

In 1991, for the first time in history, the ANC-aligned South African National Students Congress (SANSCO) participated in a University of Cape Town student government election. SANSCO leaders said they believed that their participation in the university election reflected "the mood in the country that people should talk about their differences." The decision by SANSCO, the largest university student organization in South Africa, not to boycott the election gave a major boost to the democratic process. Following the student government election, another milestone was passed when SANSCO and the traditionally white-liberal National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) merged to form the nonaligned South African Students Congress (SASCO), with the stated objective of depoliticizing, unifying, and blurring the color lines of student organizations.

A recent survey found that black South Africans view education as the government's most urgent priority, ahead of housing and health care. As previously noted, the government-sponsored Education Renewal Strategy makes several far-reaching recommendations for the creation of a nonracial education system and illustrates an earnest commitment to address the crisis in this critical nation-building sector. It should be noted, however, that the 68 ERS proposals could only be adopted by making changes in the present constitution. Although the government has thus far put off confronting the bloated education bureaucracy, the opening up of an increasing number of schools, teacher training colleges, and technikons to all races demonstrates marked progress toward removing apartheid from education.

In the search for a nationally acceptable and effective

system, a culture of learning is being developed to replace the concept of "liberation before education" with "education for liberation." The crisis in black education will not be remedied quickly, but the openness of discussion among the government, the ANC and other black political parties, the private sector, and student organizations gives hope that the bitter fruits of South Africa's learning tree are beginning to sweeten.

Bruce McKenney has recently returned from a year of graduate work in African Studies at the University of Cape Town on a scholarship from Brown University. After receiving his B.A. with honors in political science from Brown in 1990, he served for several months as an intern in the African Studies Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. He has traveled extensively in southern Africa and spent an undergraduate semester at the University of Cape Town in 1989.

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