**Schools Twenty Years into our Democracy**

**In 1994 we celebrated our new democracy after the conclusion of a long process of negotiations which publically started after the unbanning of the ANC. When the ANC swoop to power we were happy with the prospects of a better life for all. Education was one of the key foci for the new developmental state. Old departments were amalgamated and new Provincial Education Departments each with its own history were established. This was a very difficult task. Black schools and infrastructure (76%) was willfully neglected and underdeveloped, white infrastructure (12%) was the best and compared well with the best in the developed world, “coloured” (10%) a bit better and Indian infrastructure (2%) comparatively much better. Some of the first pieces of legislation to introduce change were the South African School Act, Norms and Standards for Funding of schools and Educators Employment Act. Education was considered by all as important and received more than 24% of the annual budget.**

**A few years ago I interviewed a teacher literally in tears and shame complaining that although it is June she feels bad that she does not know the names of all the learners in her class because there are so many. In many recent discussions with school principals and teachers, amongst others a smaller class size and a lower teacher: learner ratio still is the greatest need and concern at poorer schools.**

**In 1994 we visited schools in Zimbabwe. Visiting one of the “very best” urban grammar school in Harare the advantage compared with the rest of Harare’s broken-down schools was huge. I recall the comments amongst the South African delegation that “we will not allow this to continue in South Africa”. Twenty years on and the reality is it has been so difficult to equal the playing field between rich and poor schools. Someone once said that if we fail to share the wealth we must consider sharing the poverty.**

**The past two years I had the pleasure to visit schools in all nine provinces, rural and urban schools, small and large schools, meeting teachers and school managers collecting data on curriculum implementation, classroom practices and instructional leadership. In cases the conditions under which learning and teaching take place are horrendous. I recall the urine smell hanging in the air, no basic services or failed infrastructure and the large classes BUT a strong will and determination to continue with the learning and teaching process. Teachers are teaching, learners are learning and managers are managing.**

**Turning back the clock of 300 years of underdevelopment by colonialism, slavery and apartheid is not going to happen overnight. Certainly not within 20 years. Given the great costs of building infrastructure balanced against other social needs the government of the day makes difficult choices. When learners, teachers and schools are judged the indigent and contextual factors are glossed over by “public opinion” because it keeps reminding the privileged of our past and plays on the conscience of their affluence.**

**Sarah Graham-Brown reported in 1991 that formally educating the poor, the most vulnerable and the marginalized has created new aspirations & demands. The poor are led to believe it offers hope of social mobility with the tension between the “ideal of education” and creating a “meritocratic society” with “limited job opportunities”. She argues that the poor are “least likely” to gain full access to an appropriate education of high quality. She argues that radical change is needed to seize and reverse the crisis in education and build skills and confidence for development. This is a serious problem since education in the developing south brings hope out of poverty.**

**Today twenty years since 1994 and urban public schools are still faced with large class sizes, unsuccessful poverty quintiles, inadequate norms and standards funding, unfair learner admissions to affluent schools, a disastrous post distribution model with annual staffing establishments that cause instability and uncertainty, the neglect and decay of school infrastructure and a skewed labour market in favour of the rich.**

**Since 1994 the evil school inspectorate was never reintroduced. The word school inspector conjures negative and painful memories but it is also a phrase so apt because it clearly spells out the function and purpose. Many have made the appeal, including the Minister for Public Service Administration (PSA) to bring back school inspectors. The return of a backward and cruel school inspectorate cannot be condoned. What I support is the need to augment and improve the control function vested in a new school inspectorate. We need better school inspectors. It is a need that should be openly debated with the organised teaching profession and civil society.**

**Let me conclude by sharing another story with you. In 2000 a farm worker in Paarl was interviewed on TV about the improvement in the quality of his life since 1994. He said that in 1994 he thought he would “be free” but instead all he received was “the vote”. Clearly there is still much to be done. [Published in the Athlone News]**