

School zoning still reflects apartheid era

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THE process of the admission of pupils to schools for the 2018 academic year is well under way. This is an opportune time to speak about the impact of admission policies on social transformation.

The management of the admissions raises a number of important issues around co-operative governance and separation of powers, as well as the reasonable exercise of public power or functions.

At the core of this process is the right to basic education, non-discrimination and the need to redress historic imbalances to achieve substantive equality.

The South African Schools Act empowers a school governing body (SGB) to determine the school's admission policy. Despite an emphasis on fairness and reasonableness in the exercise of this function, discrimination largely per-

meates the process.

Pupils without identity, passport or permit numbers are unlawfully excluded from accessing their right to basic education, language as a potential barrier continues to be a hot topic in the public education sector, while some schools continue to charge application fees, thereby excluding pupils from poor socio-economic backgrounds.

Pupils with learning or health barriers are often excluded from the mainstream education system despite formal policies emphasising the need for inclusive education. In the past, some schools have even refused admission to pupils on the basis of allergies.

All pupils, regardless of specific characteristics, behavioural records or ability to perform, have a fundamental right to receive a basic education.

The practice in some schools to select pupils on the basis of administrative burden or performance runs contrary to the role of a public institution, where such institutions play such an important role in advancing equality and social

transformation.

As highlighted by the Constitutional Court in *Fedsas v MEC for Education, Gauteng*: "Public schools are not rarefied spaces only for the bright, well-mannered and financially well-heeled learners. They are public assets which must advance not only the parochial interest of its immediate learners but may... also be required to help achieve universal and non-discriminatory access to education."

But discrimination and the perpetuation of inequality is also largely indiscriminate and may be unintentional. So let's talk about admission zoning practices and what they mean for equality.

While zoning is not always prescribed by the provincial government, in the vast majority of schools preference is given to pupils whose parents live or work in the area.

Many don't see a problem with this – allocating placements on this basis

provides an amount of certainty and convenience, reduces travel costs and alleviates other potential administrative difficulties in the admission process. This is true, but what lies beyond is the reality that the spatial geography continues to reflect apartheid-era divisions along lines of race and socio-economic class.

Pupils without identity, passport or permit numbers are unlawfully excluded

white.

The ability of SGBs to charge fees means that schools hosting a majority of families from a higher socio-economic background can hire additional teachers, build more classrooms and provide more facilities such as computer laboratories and sporting facilities.

Schools located in historically dis-

advantaged areas often rely on stretched state funding as parents or guardians cannot always afford to pay school fees.

So, where you live or work will define where your child goes to school and the quality of education he or she will receive.

The acknowledgement of this reality drives perceptions that a pupil's school is automatically linked to his or her status, ability and opportunities.

In Gauteng, for example, certain schools received thousands of applications this year while about 400 schools received less than 50 applications each.

While schools predominantly apply geographic criteria for admissions, parents and guardians are increasingly moving outside their areas of residence or work in search of better opportunities for their children.

And isn't this what democracy is about – the freedom to break the cycle of segregation, poverty and deprivation?

What is the solution? More regulation? Maybe, but we should also be wary of creating an over-regulated and policy-

heavy public education system that constrains community-driven values.

Perhaps the solution, for now, is one proposed by the Gauteng Department of Education in extending the geographic proximity to 30km when applying zoning during an admissions process.

We also need a shift in mindset and a commitment by schools to address inequalities in basic education through equitable admissions processes that take into account historical imbalances and the vital role of education in promoting integration and real transformation.

The principle that the best interest of the child is of paramount importance must be at the forefront. As one of the key drivers of social advancement, the education system must reflect and be capable of achieving the ideals of constitutional democracy, with principles of freedom, equality, dignity and the need for the redress of past historical imbalances at its core.

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