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Education and training need the involvement of all levels of government

Education and training – including a growing need now for so-called ‘further education’, ‘skills development’ and ‘adult education’ – rank amongst South Africa’s highest priorities, with an overall national budget approaching R200 billion. And so it should be, as this is the country’s investment in its future.

In many developed countries, education and research are managed under a single ministry. However, in South Africa these endeavours are managed by at least four separate ministries: basic education, higher education, arts and culture, and science and technology. There are other departments too, such as those for labour and trade and industry, which have strong human resource developmental programmes. This capacity reflects the urgent attention that central government places on addressing the backlog in education and training. The question that remains is, how effectively are provincial and local governments working to support this national effort? Given the highly centralised nature of national government, one can rightfully ask whether there is any meaningful role to be played by provincial government at all.

The precise role played by provincial governments in our education system is not clear, and has not been clear since the inception of democracy in 1994, despite the huge financial resources that are expended at this level. Much inefficiency appears to have developed: corruption, nepotism and cadre deployment rule the roost in many provincial governments, while the real problems facing education go unattended. Teacher delinquency, vandalism, drug abuse, teenage pregnancy and petty crime – all ostensibly requiring provincial government intervention – are rampant at many schools, but these problems are often dealt with in an *ad hoc* manner rather than as a part of a deliberate and carefully planned strategy. There is no clear plan for the deployment of teachers in provinces, and many schools continue to lack basic textbooks. Perhaps the most conspicuous admission of failure by a provincial education department has been that of the Eastern Cape Province, which was placed under national administration earlier this year.

Central government is urged to clarify to a greater extent the distinct role that provincial governments should play in our education system. Some provincial education departments are more successful than others in managing the schools within their control. These departments could be a starting point to help develop national best practice, as well as a list of priorities and a *modus operandi* for all provincial education departments – a kind of blueprint for success. South Africa does not have the luxury to experiment any further, but needs to adopt policies and practices that have a proven record of effectiveness in dealing with the enormous challenges facing education in our country. Provincial education departments need to become much more proactive and vigilant in dealing with ongoing problems within the schools under their care.

The campaigning preceding the recent local government elections gave us a good opportunity to hear first-hand from the political parties about the priorities that they are setting for local governments 17 years into our democracy. By now one should expect greater maturity in deliberations about our future, and a deeper understanding by politicians of the real challenges facing South Africa. Naturally, issues around service delivery and corruption head the list of local priorities that need fixing, but there has been hardly any talk about the priorities for education and training. This raises the question: do local governments have any role to play in improving our education system, and, if so, what should that role be, and how should it differ from the roles played by other branches of government?

Clearly, simply duplicating the efforts of central and provincial government at the municipal level would be wasteful. By the same token, simply increasing municipal bureaucracies to address the educational needs of the country must be strenuously opposed. The huge investment by national government must translate more directly to significant improvements where it really matters – at the chalkface – with little wastage at intermediary levels. But local municipalities could extend their ambit of interest, oversight and support to schools. Local governments can and should do a lot more to support the development of education. Science centres, museums, science fairs, facilitating school visits to local industries, and even involving local chambers of commerce in financially assisting schools are only some ways in which local municipalities could play a critical role. All that is needed is a little lateral thinking to find ways in which local governments can and should get involved. The first step is for local governments to recognise the indispensable and unique roles that they are in a position to play in fostering an enabling environment for education within their jurisdictions.