

# Why parents opt for low-fee private schools

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THE growth in low-fee private schools indicates parents' frustration with the quality of education at public schools.

And should the quality of public schools increase, low-fee private schooling would decline.

This is according to analyst and former higher education director-general, Mary Metcalfe.

Metcalfe was responding to the latest research by the Centre for Development and Enterprise, a think tank which found that low-fee private schools are becoming a popular alternative to poorly performing public schools.

But Metcalfe said: "These educational contexts are not suitable, and the costs and dangers of the traveling are also a problem – it is an indication of their desire to find a better quality of education."

The study found that low-fee private schools offer pupils better access to their teachers, which results in better pass rates.

In Gauteng, 10 percent of children attend private schools, both low fee and high end.

The centre looked at how private schooling could cater for SA's poor, and concentrated on urban, peri-urban and rural settlements in Gauteng, Limpopo and Eastern Cape provinces.

It found 117 low-fee private schools in the three provinces. Schools are situated in abandoned factories, shopping centres, shacks and high-rise buildings in the CBDs.

The research stated that policy makers had a responsibility to ensure that low-fee private schools provided good education, to put competitive pressure on public schools to raise the quality of schooling.

Based on a performance test of Grade 6 pupils from the private and public schools in the same areas, the research showed that private schools are better than public schools in some respects.

Even though private schools have fewer facilities than public schools, the pupil-teacher ratio at the private schools is lower, which encourages easier one-on-one sessions and results in better pass rates.

Metcalfe did not fully condone low-fee private schools, but said that at the end of the day, parents made choices they felt were best for their children. "What is more critical for me, is for communities, teachers and all social partners to work urgently and with determination to support the government to improve public schooling as that is the key way in which the poor will access quality education," she said.

The report proposed that there needs to be an increase in the number of high-quality private schools, which would be accessible to poor children.

This would widen education choices for parents and pupils in all communities, and provide regulations that would encourage public and private schools to improve.

“International experience has shown that the regulatory environment can either facilitate or inhibit the development of innovative, low-cost private schools and as such it is crucial to the contribution they can make to broadening access to quality education,” read the report.

The dean of education at the University of Johannesburg, Sarah Gravett, said parents need to correct the perception that independent means quality.

She said there are a lot of excellent public schools compared to the independent schools.

Parents need to investigate both private and public schools because on many occasions they do not know what happens at the independent schools, she said, adding that some of them are not really better than public schools.

The report suggested that the government should not pay much attention to how schools achieve their results, but rather to whether they generate good results.

But Helenne Ulster, the principal of United Church School in Yeoville, said parents overlook the environment because at private schools their children are not just numbers; they get individual attention.

Her non-profit, Christian-based school is registered with the Independent Schools’ Association of SA and the Gauteng Department of Education.

Ulster said the United Church School, which caters for students from Grades R to 12, was started out of a need to provide quality and affordable education to largely black school-going children.

Mostly, Ulster found, children who leave private schools for public schools for the better facilities the latter offered, usually come back after a year. “The facility, at the end of the day, doesn’t matter... We care about their education and their emotional wellbeing,” she said, adding that at private schools, the staff are also much more dedicated.

The research showed that many low-fee private schools find it difficult to comply with all the legislation and regulations.

The regulations include detailed annual reports, adherence to management check-lists and submission of audited financial statements if they receive a state subsidy.

“There are signs that the policy environment in general is becoming disabling for private schools, especially low-fee ones,” read the report.

In order to operate legally, all private schools have to be registered with their provincial education departments.

To help address regulatory challenges, the report suggested that a supportive regulatory framework be introduced.

The framework would provide a “probationary period and provisional registration in which private schools that are not yet able to meet all the compliance requirements are given time to become compliant”.

Metcalfe suggested that to avoid fly-by-night schooling operations, the state needed to have a rigorous regulatory framework.

However, the report further suggested that private schools should meet reasonable registration conditions. It pointed out that good results did not depend on state registration and certification.

“Many low-fee, private schools have unqualified teachers, but achieve better results than equivalent, local public schools,” read the report.

It found that low-fee private schools produced decent results using limited resources, and were responsive to parents’ demands for quality education.

Should companies, private financial institutions and education funders seeking to contribute to an improvement in the quality of education available to SA’s poor become more involved in the low-fee, private schooling arena, this could change, read the report.

Financial assistance and expertise could be provided to help low-fee private schools to establish themselves and expand.

However, care needs to be taken that private interventions do not undermine the independence and funding streams available to these low-fee private schools, said the report.