

# Championing education as

If we were able to rise to the occasion of football's greatest spectacle, surely we should be able to focus the same energy on improving teaching?

COMMENT

Ahmed C Bawa & Peter Vale

**T**wo problems dog Blade Nzimande's inventive green paper on post-school education: it is too late and it looks, alas, to be heading in the wrong direction.

Certainly, it would be a good policy to broaden the base of post-school education by funnelling students who are not immediately ready for university towards well-functioning further education and training (FET) alternatives, and to train artisans, artists and entrepreneurs who will provide skills in an economy in need of growth.

As always, though, the devil of funding, staffing and equipping the FET colleges, in particular, will lie in the detail.

But there is a more severe constraint on Nzimande's redesign of the FET sector — schooling, a direction in which the green paper does not go. The annual pageant of matriculation high-flyers masks the fact that, however the statistics are diced and sliced, South Africa's public schools have failed its young.

In the latest human development report of the United Nations, South Africa appears at 123rd place — after Mauritius at 77 and Botswana at 118. Of the 50 countries immediately ahead of this, only five or six have

a higher gross national income per capita. What is most shocking is that the average participation of South Africans in schooling is 8.5 years — way short of the 13.1 years it is expected to be.

Happily, hope is not a commodity that South Africa's people have lacked, especially in terms of schooling. The raw courage of Soweto's schoolchildren in June 1976, although ignited over the medium of instruction, was based on a hope for better schools. The message they sent to apartheid's apparatchiks and, it has to be said, to the bewildered in exile was this: schooling matters.

It is a stunning indictment of all that we have achieved as a country and as a people that, 36 years later, the cause for which they gave their lives remains so thoroughly unattained.

So what is to be done? For the next decade, we believe, South Africa should mobilise around the idea of schooling for the common good. Here, too, there is good news. For all their many divides, South Africa's people have shown an extraordinary capacity to mobilise around priorities when these arise.

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The pattern was set not by the Fifa World Cup but around the fraught issue of HIV/Aids. The building of social awareness centred on the virus and, more recently, on delivering antiretrovirals and is among this country's most significant social gains.

It was accomplished, as all South Africans know, despite the enormous hurdles put in the way by myopic political leadership.

Failure to do the same with schooling will draw the country towards the abyss — not because, as economists would have us believe, the economy will fail, although this is important, but because to continue to fail our young is to invite social upheaval.

National mobilisation must begin, as the struggle against apartheid showed, with imagining something different from the present.



# we did the World Cup

Great schooling begins with idealism and, whatever the purported cold rationality of the market suggests, there need be no apology for this. Successful schooling, for its part, begins with a national commitment to the idea that teachers matter most in every community — not that they may matter most or should matter most, but that they do matter most.

This is not simply a plea for South Africa's teachers to become more professional — although that is especially important in the face of the South African Democratic Teachers' Union's obduracy in this direction. It is to insist that every official conversation in the country needs to be about teachers and their issues and the quality of their work.

To insist on this is not untoward: if every politician and every public official championed Fifa's 2010 World Cup, why should they not now champion teaching? If the then-president cleared his desk for what was said to be Fifa's pressing business, as he did, should this president, Jacob Zuma, not clear his desk to attend to the urgency of schooling?

If laws were suspended to facilitate Fifa's interests, is it not more important to facilitate education that is professional?

Then four subjects — mathematics, science, English and history — must be drawn to the centre of the national pedagogic enterprise. Here the task would be to appoint four national czars — one in each of these subjects. These individuals must be permitted to stand outside

the envy and ambition that is all too often the grist of university politics and interdepartmental intrigues in government. They must be professionals whose central concern is not the factionalism of the ruling party

or the busy ambition of the formal opposition. And, finally, they must be specialists who are steeped in something that Nelson Mandela taught, but which we have lost: public service.

Their task would be to explore ways in which the country's students can best access these crucial disciplines. Their approach to the task should be innovative, even experimental, but it should not

lose sight of the fact that public money should be spent for the common good. Plainly, South Africa's universities must play a decisive role in this national mobilisation.

Admittedly, many institutions have taken promising steps both in schooling and in teaching, but much work remains to be done.

A helpful start would be for every university to appoint a pro-vice-chancellor for schooling who enjoys the support of the institution's leaders. The individual appointed must be an academic with energy, passion and an eye for directing the entire university to help in schooling the young who annually queue at what the Freedom Charter so graphically describes as "the doors of learning".

This move would certainly not make every institution or academic happy and we recognise it would not enjoy institutional consensus. But, frankly, it is too late for these niceties. And, as South Africa's story teaches, serious mobilisation requires sacrifice for the common good. All this will not be easy, of course. But the clock is ticking — and the task before us seems abundantly clear. As playwright George Bernard Shaw wrote more than a century ago: "Just do what must be done. This may not be happiness, but it is greatness."

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