

Education

Admission patterns plague schools

Understanding migration and age dynamics can address placement problems

COMMENT
Eddie Rakabe

The first day of school in Gauteng has come to be associated with controversy and anxiety as thousands of parents wait for their children to be placed in one of the seemingly brimming public schools.

This year started with its fair share of disquiet when schools reopened but 23 435 pupils remained in limbo.

In addition, there were the legal and racial tensions over Hoërskool Overvaal in Vereeniging, which wouldn't admit 55 English-speaking pupils as instructed by the Gauteng education department. The high court upheld the school's decision, which said it needed time to set up a parallel teaching system.

The late placement of pupils and admission anomalies partly signify system-wide weaknesses in education planning, particularly in dealing with the mobility of school-goers and urbanisation.

Urban development patterns in South Africa are changing, from the one characterised by the influx of job-seeking migrants only to one that includes the movement of school-going children from rural to urban schools.

Lured by the prospects of job opportunities and open school choice policies, parents and school-goers vote with their feet in search of presumably better education in urban areas. This migration affects the overall schooling system — in the planning and funding for both the sending and receiving areas — with Gauteng being the most affected as a leading urban destination.

Education policy reforms and investments have rightly been directed at addressing historical imbalances in rural areas, but to a point of overlooking the rapidly



Burden: The movement of children from 'rural' provinces to Gauteng and the Western Cape makes planning difficult for these provinces. Photo: Delwyn Verasamy

changing spatial demographics. To the credit of policymakers, this oversight may have occurred inadvertently, because the magnitude of rural education challenges are immense and demanding: facilities are poor and unsuitable for effective learning, schools lack basic services and qualified teachers are not always available.

That said, Gauteng continues to attract in excess of 100 000 new pupils annually, over and above its natural enrolment growth, from other provinces — which is consistent with national urban migration patterns.

This is exactly the reason the department of education continuously finds itself at pains to clear the applications backlog weeks beyond the first day of school and meet the resource requirements of this increased demand.

Pupils tend to move from low-performing schools in rural or peri-urban areas to high-performing schools in affluent urban areas.

School-goers or their parents are clearly exercising their freedom of movement and choice duly accorded to them by the Constitution. Mobility and open school choice policies have been at the forefront of global education reforms towards achieving racial and social equity.

South Africa should at all times embrace the ideal of freedom to choose one's school given its painful history of racially and spatially polarised access to quality education. But, much like any other transformation, the migration that this choice necessitates should be well planned for and managed.

When high-performing schools are in short supply, open school choice may lead to social stratification and an undesirable distribution of pupils caused by competition for space. It may also result in creaming — the practice of admitting pupils whose parents can afford school fees.

Gauteng and other urban nodes are sitting with a problem: a limited number of good schools are in

demand by a large number of pupils.

The influx of school-goers places an additional strain on already overstretched resources and leave excess capacity in the source areas.

Gauteng is home to 13% of the total number of pupils in South Africa but has only 11% of the total number of schools in the country, compared with the Eastern Cape and Limpopo — from where many of the pupils originate — which, respectively, account for 15% and 13% of pupils and 22% and 15% of schools.

There are many reasons these predominantly rural provinces appear to have an excess of schools. It relates to historical overinvestment and a sparsely distributed population.

Although the figures remain disproportionately high, there has been a concerted effort to reduce the number of schools. Almost 4 000 schools were closed or merged between 1999 and 2016, and an estimated 2 000 were reopened to address the dynamic migration patterns of school-goers and new demands.

The coexistence of school shortages in urban centres and an apparent oversupply of schools in the sending areas leads to a number of fundamental questions.

Should the government build new schools in the affluent areas, where demand is high — as many suggested during the recent Hoërskool Overvaal admission policy debacle — or should it meaningfully address the reasons so many school-goers are leaving rural areas to seek schooling in urban centres?

The answer isn't clear. Resources are finite and urbanisation is inevitable. Government will need a combination of interventions to remedy the spatial education distortions caused by rapid mobility.

Improving the management and performance of schools in rural areas should be the starting point. Compelling evidence indicates that pupils are unlikely to leave high-performing school districts, as we have seen with recent matric results. High-performing school districts with low socioeconomic conditions — such as Venda in Limpopo and the Fezile Dabi district in the Free State — have the lowest incidents of pupil migration.

Education planners should be sensitive to the spatial and demographic shifts so that resources keep up with these. Understanding pupil age structure and their movement patterns can help provinces to balance investment between primary and secondary schools and thus improve their efficiency. Gauteng may need to direct more investment into secondary schools because school-goers tend to move when they are older.

To achieve this level of co-ordinated planning, provincial education departments must overcome their vested interest in how education budgets are distributed and operate as part of a single education system. If this doesn't happen the very principle of freedom to choose could prove catastrophic to the system.

Eddie Rakabe manages the fiscal policy research unit at the Financial and Fiscal Commission. These are his own views.