

Poorer schools let down

An HSRC study has found serious flaws in the government's ranking system for schools funding, writes **Latoya Newman**

THE ranking system used by the government to determine how much funding each school gets is flawed, leading to many schools with poor children without much-needed funds, a study by the Human Sciences Research Council has found.

The quintile ranking system has led to some schools that are among the most disadvantaged receiving inadequate funding even though their needs are "as great as, or greater than" those schools receiving more funding.

The report has been welcomed by the Association for School Governing Bodies, the SA Democratic Teachers Union (Sadtu), The Parents' Association and the Legal Resources Centre. The groups said they had argued against the system for years because it prejudiced poor pupils.

This week, national basic education spokesman Granville Whittle admitted there were flaws in the system and said the department was working towards reviewing it.

The quintile system was introduced in 2006 with the government's "no-fee" schools policy that is intended to help give the poorest pupils access to education.

Schools in the lowest quintile (one and two) are fully supported by the no-fee policy and, therefore, those pupils are fully subsidised by the state.

As a school's quintile ranking increases its government subsidy per child decreases, with the highest quintile schools receiving the least amount money per child.

As of last year schools in quintile one received R775 per child, quintile two received R711, quintile three R581, quintile four R388 and quintile five R129.

The main gripe with the system has been that it does not assess the actual poverty of



Education groups say the latest findings vindicate their claims that disadvantaged schools are being prejudiced.

pupils in a school, but rather ranks the school based on infrastructure in and around the school and the economic status of its surrounding community (according to information from Statistics South Africa).

In the HSRC report, *School Money: Funding Flaws*, researchers noted a number of problems with the system. These include that:

- Schools that are mostly disadvantaged are those assigned to the middle quintiles (whereas they should be in the lower quintiles).

- Schools with very similar resource deprivation may be receiving widely differing amounts of financial help.

- In more than one instance, on average a school in quintile one is better off on some indicators than one in quintile two.

- In terms of the population of pupils served, quintile two

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The Legal Resources Centre in Durban, which is already acting on behalf of six KwaZulu-Natal schools which last year lodged a high court application against the government to challenge the amount of state funds they receive, said since *The Mercury* reported on the cases last year, many more schools had come to them for assistance.

The regional director of the centre, Mahendra Chetty, said the HSRC report had vindicated them in their claim that the ranking system was flawed and was an injustice against schools and pupils who were genuinely disadvantaged.

"The department over the years has tended to look at this

issue with a narrow lens, not looking at children commuting from outside the area where a school is located. In addition, one may have a school in a working class urban area, but if the school has as its primary intake pupils from a nearby informal settlement, the latter facts seem to escape the attention of the department," he said.

Reginald Chilisa, chairman of the KZN branch of the National Association of School Governing Bodies, said there were schools in townships like KwaMashu, Umlazi and Chatsworth that were in high quintile ranks and yet most of their pupils came from informal settlements around these schools. "We hope the government will now come to its senses," he said.

Sadtu spokesman Nomusa Cembali said they had long said that quintiles were an unreliable measure: "While there are

administrative processes in place for schools to appeal their quintile status, we feel the entire system needs to be re-worked."

Sayed Rajack of the KZN Parents' Association said the current system was counter-productive and did more harm than good for disadvantaged pupils.

Whittle said a number of queries about the effectiveness of the quintile ranking had been received. "It is agreed that the model used to place the schools into quintiles resulted in, for instance, two schools with similar socio-economic backgrounds being placed into different quintiles, and that seemed to be the case mostly with the middle quintile schools. The challenge was that the schools that were next to the cut-off line between the quintiles were those mostly affected since the differences be-

tween those schools are minimal.

"The quintile system was introduced at a time when there was no other relevant mechanism to differentiate between the schools based on their poverty levels for funding purposes... Review of policy is necessary to see if it is achieving its intended objectives or requires improvement, and this can be influenced by developments taking place within and outside the system..."

It was therefore important to look at how the system came into place and assess its relevance based on current circumstances. Whittle said the department was in consultation with stakeholders on proposals to review the quintile ranking and to look at its future use.

"The review is focusing mainly on the relevance of the quintile ranking for purposes of determining funding levels to schools. The discussions on the proposal are still at an early stage and no decisions or conclusions have been made as yet," he said.

Dr Anil Kanjee, executive director of the Centre for Education Quality Improvement at the HSRC, said the Education Department had a number of options to rectify the problem.

"One would be to look at the socio-economic status of pupils at schools; the other would be to look at the current resourcing of schools, assessing what schools have and do not have in terms of textbooks, computers and other resources.

A third option would be to collapse quintiles one to three because these often overlap and simply have a low, medium and high category of funding," he said.

The next point of research for Kanjee and his team is to look at the financial implications of incorrect funding of schools, in terms of overspending and underspending by the department.