

# Quality Education News

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## Questions that the Rivonia education trial raise

### Dear Supporter of Quality Education

Recently Rivonia Primary School challenged a learner-enrolment ruling of the Gauteng Department of Education. The school maintained that it had reached full capacity and couldn't enrol any more learners. That decision was challenged by the Department which took the school to court. Rivonia Primary lost the case. The judge ruled that the Department had the final say as to when a school had reached full capacity.

The judgement is being widely discussed in the media. Obviously, the Constitution of the country has precedence over the decisions made by a School Governing Body (SGB). Yet SGBs, parents and teachers are asking a number of questions about the issue. Typical questions being asked are:

### Why is there such an overwhelming demand for placement at that school?

A major reason is that Rivonia Primary has an excellent track record of providing quality primary education. The parent community digs deep into its pockets to try and keep the teacher: learner ratio at an optimal level. Additional classrooms have been built and the school employs extra teachers to that allocated by the Department.

### Why aren't empty or low learner-enrolment schools being better utilised?

There are schools in Gauteng that could enrol far more pupils. Yet there are few takers to enrol at such schools. Parents are willing to pay close to a R1000 a month in taxi fares to enrol their children at a good school many kilometres away rather than the one nearest their home. Wouldn't it make better financial sense to families and the Department to make every school a place where sound education is provided? Wouldn't the pressure for placement be reduced for the excellent schools?

### What is being done to deal with dysfunctional schools?

One reason why parents avoid sending their children to certain neighbourhood schools is because they're dysfunctional. There's a poor work ethic amongst the staff; there's high absenteeism and poor examination results. Those schools need rigorous School

Effectiveness and Whole School Evaluation audits. Subsequent decisive action should then be taken. Remove poor performing principals and teachers. Yet thousands of them remain in the system. The Department of Basic Education (DBE) is either unable and/or unwilling to deal with those staff members.

Professional people shouldn't need to have someone looking over their shoulders to check on their work performance. Unfortunately there are many 'slackers' in the teaching profession. Some of them behave like royal game because they know that their union will protect them from DBE disciplinary action. Nobody can touch them as they daily destroy young people's school careers and rubbish the image of the profession.

### What is the best teacher: learner ratio?

There needs to be an educational debate on the ideal teacher: learner ratio. Those primary schools that have the means, strive to have a maximum of about 25 learners in the Foundation Phase (Grades 1 to 3). For Grades Four to Seven the target is often 30 per class. Different ratios are used in high schools with their wide range of specialist subjects. Thousands of our classrooms are heterogeneous in which many cultures and languages interact. There's an added complexity to teaching learners in such classrooms.

An anonymous SGB chairman made this acerbic, trenchant comment about the number of learners per teacher debate:

*We can't just crowd classrooms to the point that teaching is absolutely useless. If we're not careful ... we've already got kids coming out of matric who can't read or write. It's funny that the government thinks this is about discrimination, when it's actually about education.*

### Will parents leave in increasing numbers from public schools?

The Rivonia Primary School trial could have huge significance on school admission policies. The DBE has had as one of its slogans: 'Quality Education for All'. It wants to provide a school system that parents believe in and that is in the best interests of their children.



This newsletter is edited by SAQI and distributed to those schools benefiting from their participation in the MySchool programme. MySchool acts as a conduit which raises and delivers essential funding for education and social development on a sustainable basis. This enables members of the community to participate in the future development of our nation.



The very opposite seems to be happening. Statistics show that an ever-growing number of parents are removing their children from public schools. There has been an explosion in the number of private schools established since the first democratic elections. There were about 500 private schools in 1994. The National Alliance of Independent Schools believes that presently there are more than 2500 private schools. The DBE maintains that there are 1517 private schools comprising 6% of the total number of schools.

The move to private schools is not a 'white flight' out of public education. The DBE statistics indicate that 72% of those learners are black. Will the exodus out of public schools continue and grow?

### **How does the Rivonia ruling impact on teacher morale?**

I was talking recently to a teacher who had moved from a public primary school where she had 47 learners in her class. She told me that she was now in 'paradise' at a private school where there were 25 learners in her class. Teaching in the public school had become a daunting and totally exhausting experience.

Teaching is a high-stress profession. Whatever can be done to reduce that stress level needs to happen. To reduce the number of learners in a class would be a huge stress reducer. Teachers ask whether educational officials really understand what it's like to teach so many learners in a class. Are the officials aware of the added administrative and marking workload which is often done late into the night? When and for how many years did the lawmakers themselves teach such huge classes of learners?

When teachers are too stressed, mental and physical health problems start. The quality of their teaching drops. If it's too much to handle, they often leave the profession or go to a private school. The public school system cannot afford to lose a single quality teacher. But that's exactly what's happens when they flee to private schools! You might know of teachers who've gone from public to private schools. However, how many teachers do you know who've switched from a private to a public school?!

### **To what schools do the education officials send their own children?**

Where do those officials responsible for putting Mrs Carol Drysdale – principal of Rivonia Primary School – in the dock send their own children to school? Do they send them to public schools where the teacher: learner ratio is that as stipulated by the education department? Are their children sent to those private schools where the ratio is much lower? If their children attend a public school, is it at a school where the teacher: learner ratio is low because the SGB appoints additional teachers?

### **Why are principals and teachers forbidden to speak directly to the media on contentious issues?**

Seldom do we read or see teachers publicly criticising education department policy. When there are incidents at a school that could put any Departmental official in an unfavourable light, the principal is forbidden to speak directly to the media. An official will 'handle' the media. Obviously, principals and teachers are allowed to make public statements if the school and the Department are seen in a good light.

Viewpoints of the schools are conveyed to the media only through parents, the public as well as the SGBs and their lawyers.

Principals and teachers are silent. The education world would have liked to have heard directly from Carol Drysdale her side of the story. Do we have the full picture of what is already being done for all the learners at the school? Do we know all the pertinent facts to make our own educationally sound understanding of the court case?

Our Constitution guarantees us freedom of speech. Surely it applies in our schools too. Rigorous and open debate from all involved in education would be beneficial. When an individual or educational institution oversteps the boundaries of fair comment, there are many legal means to redress such wrongs.

Other democratic countries such as Britain allow their teachers to publicly criticise educational policy that they think could be improved on. Their input keeps the respective education departments on their toes. By so doing, teachers make a huge input towards the continuous improvement of their schools.

### **So, what's to be done in the Rivonia education trial aftermath?**

The trial highlighted once more the gulf between excellent quality schools and those that disgrace the profession. Guesstimates are that 80% of our schools are still dysfunctional. Parents are desperate for their children to go to good schools. Those schools are overwhelmed with applications for admission. They are the golden geese in the education system. We want far more of them; in fact we want every school to be a quality one. Let's not kill the teachers' spirit of dedication, morale and selfless service.

### **Focus on the real culprits**

The point is that Drysdale and Rivonia Primary's School Governing Body would not have to fight this ludicrous battle if the department – and indeed our national education ministry – were doing their jobs and providing our poor people (the vast majority of whom are black) with decent schools within walking distance of their homes.

Instead of trying to attack a dedicated and professional educator who has helped thousands of pupils (black and white) in her career, our educational authorities should concentrate on rescuing our township schools – and ensuring that faith is restored in all schools.

*(Excerpts from The Star editorial of 15 September 2012, page 14)*

Richard Hayward

# Pithy pointers for sparkling star teachers



Professor Jonathan Jansen is Principal and Vice-Chancellor of the University of the Free State. One task that he recently undertook was to write a daily letter to his two children as well as his 30,000 other 'children' – the students at the university. Then there was the wider public who also looked forward to reading his daily letter on Twitter and Facebook.

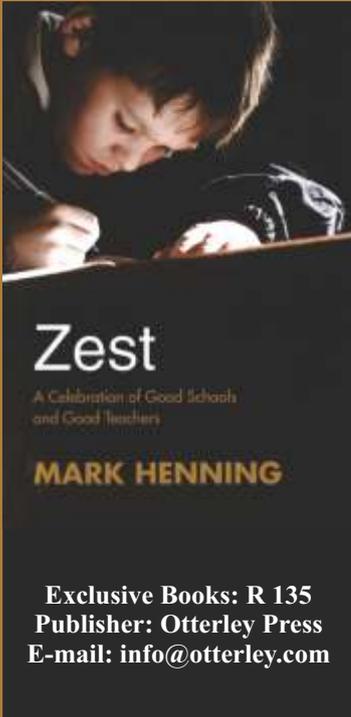
His daily 'tweets to make you think' have been put into book form. Below is a tiny sample of wise, wry one-liners found in his book. Every classroom teacher and person in senior management will appreciate Quality truisms such as:

- Do not tolerate those who are different from you; embrace them.
- If you even suspect you are getting a job because of your skin, say 'no thank you'; we taught you self-respect.
- Be suspicious of crowds; learn to think for yourself.
- The key to successful leadership is discovering your own brokenness.
- The most dangerous thing you can do is to make decisions when you're angry.
- I can tell you that I have gained more wisdom from people with no schooling than knowledge from people with degrees.
- Whenever people praise you, redirect that praise to those who made you and your achievements possible.
- Nobody ever won the Nobel Prize for following established wisdom: think and live against the grain.
- A leader needs both a soft hand and a hard hand; the secret is to know when to use which hand.
- There is no such thing as a perfect team; even Jesus had a dropout.
- Your loyalty must never be to a country or a government but to ideals worth living for.
- Tell the waiter the food sucks; learn the habit of speaking your mind.
- The difference between having schooling and having education is the number of books you read.
- There is no such thing as African time; only wasting other people's time.
- There is nothing worse than pretence; be yourself, always.
- Unlearn the South African habit of confusing discipline with punishment.
- The day you stop learning is the day you died.
- Learn to lean on stronger shoulders; do not bear your pain alone.
- Do not respond to every sleight and provocation; remain focussed on what is important.
- When you take a stand on principle, people might not like you but they will respect you.

(Acknowledgement: Jansen, J 2012. **Letters to my children**. Johannesburg: Bookstorm and Pan Macmillan. CNA: R 120. The book has also been published in Afrikaans)



# Add Zest to your staff library



Mark Henning has a distinguished career in education spanning five decades. He was born into a family of teachers. This book is a distillation of wisdom from his own experiences as a beloved teacher and Headmaster but also of best practice seen in others. His educational insight is deep but his telling of it is coated in delightful anecdotes. At times the true tales are really funny but on occasion, beautifully poignant.

During his career Mark Henning has interacted with thousands of young people, parents and professional colleagues. At one level the book describes – through their personal accounts – what is to be found in good South African schools. The book eloquently shows how educational excellence is achieved in both private and public schools. Yes, sufficient money helps the process but it's not the critical factor. The tipping-point is the calibre of those to be found in the classroom, the staffroom, and around the head's table.

Besides being an absorbing read, the book is a most

effective professional staff development manual. One possible activity would be to select a chapter from the book and ask everyone to read it for 'homework' (examples: 'Happiness, harmony and learning', 'Heads and Governors' and 'In the beginning'). There could then be a discussion around core questions such as:

- What is the relevance of the chapter to our own school?
- What suggestions are there for us to implement or adapt?

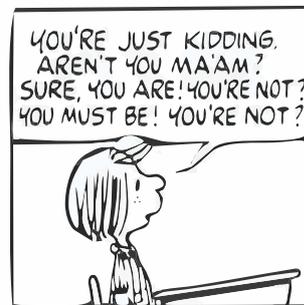
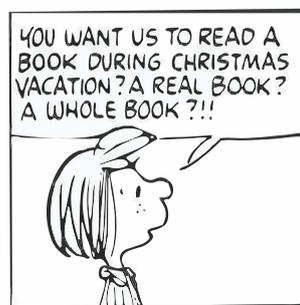
The one-word book title, **Zest**, is intriguing. Bertrand Russell, the British philosopher, was the spark for the choice of title. The famous philosopher maintained that the more things that one was zestful about, the greater the chances of happiness. Mark Henning astutely asserts that zest is an essential quality of good schools and teachers. Highly esteemed schools are brimful of zest. You can add even more effervescence and zest to your school. Buy this book.

## What are your 2013 CPD activities?

Have you drawn up your Continuous Professional Development activities for next year? SAQI has leadership and management programmes for schools and education offices. Programmes are based on Quality management theory and practices. For more details, please contact either Vanessa du Toit (Tel: 012-349-5006; [vanessa@saqi.co.za](mailto:vanessa@saqi.co.za)) or Richard Hayward (Tel: 011-888-3262; [rpdhayward@yahoo.com](mailto:rpdhayward@yahoo.com)). The workshops are done across the country. Poor schools are sponsored.

## Thank You

This email issue of QEN reaches about 10,000 readers. (The first issue in 2006 had a distribution of under a thousand.) Please continue to forward the newsletter to those who are interested in the Quality Education message. Special thanks go to Paul Harding, the MD of SAQI, for his ongoing support of this social responsibility project. Behind the scenes is his friendly secretary, Vanessa du Toit who efficiently does much of the organisational work. Aubrey Jansen is our graphic design genius who makes every issue so visually attractive. Then there's Michelle Jooste who puts the newsletter on the 'My School' website. To everyone who helps spread the Quality Education message – a huge Thank You!!



Acknowledgement: Charles M Schulz **Peanuts at school**



## Festive Season Greetings

Warm wishes are extended for the Festive Season. Enjoy the holidays. Should you be celebrating religious occasions, may they be times of Joy, Peace and Goodwill.