



RESPONSE

October 9th, 2012

Textbooks and Targets

In this weekend's *Sunday Times* there is an advertisement by the Department of Basic Education (DBE) which purports to set the record straight regarding one of the recent court judgments in the Limpopo textbook saga. In effect, the purpose of the advertisement is to castigate the NGO *Section 27*, whose High Court applications have been largely responsible for achieving some movement on this issue, for wasting 'valuable time and resources' in its latest litigation – around the non-delivery of Grade 10 textbooks.

Apart from a possible question as to whether or not a government department should spend time and (public) money quibbling about the details of a court-case, it is not the advert itself, or the legal battle that it refers to, that is most significant. Rather, it is what the advert tells us about public policy – and especially the crisis in implementation of policy – that matters. The message is contained in a few words in the advert's last sentence, which reads:

“We call on members of society, including Section 27 and its allies, to work with the Department, rather than against it, in our quest to realise the goal of providing a textbook for every child by 2014.”

The supplying of school textbooks is a matter of planning and delivery. It is certainly one of the government's more straightforward tasks unlike, say, decisions concerning nuclear power-stations or the provision of millions of jobs over the next decade. Unlike, indeed, the majority of the ambitious plans and targets set out in the National Planning Commission's (NPC) vision for 2030.

And yet, the DBE concedes not only that government has failed to supply the necessary textbooks this year, but that that failure may be expected next year as well: its self-stated goal is to provide “a textbook for every child *by 2014*”; not by 2013.

Even if we disregard the apparent suggestion that *a* textbook per child is sufficient, the implication of this target is staggering. Eighteen years on from the 1994 democratic elections that brought the present government to power, which it has held uninterruptedly since then, it is incapable of supplying school books on time and in adequate numbers. And it foresees a repeat of this incapacity next year.

In assessing the feasibility of the NPC's targets for 18 years hence, it may be worthwhile thinking ourselves back by a similar distance in time, to those days in April 1994 when people stood in long queues waiting to vote. What would the newly-enfranchised masses have thought if someone had

told them that it would take 20 years – almost two generations of school-children – for universal access to textbooks to be achieved? Surely we would have thought it absurd?

Yet that is what has happened, and it has happened in a relatively simple matter of planning and policy-implementation. As South Africans stand today 18 years away from the date on which the NPC's plans are set to bear fruit – a process in which we are asked to play our part – what can we and the NPC learn from the DBE's shocking example?

Mike Pothier
Research Co-ordinator