

Cutting standards

The Gauteng Department of Education (GDE) wants to restructure non-educator posts at the province's schools. The Sociology of Work Unit (SWOP) at Wits University was asked to examine the implications of this proposal for cleaners and security guards.

Where permanent posts exist, new allocation scales will be used to redeploy cleaning and security staff. These will be based on pupil enrolment alone and are meant to benefit previously disadvantaged schools.

Because of severe budget constraints in schools currently without allocated posts, the GDE wants to privatise these services immediately. The Department favours contracting to small, preferably black businesses.

These proposals carry grave implications for the staff affected.

No consultation

The GDE did not consult with any of the unions which organise in these sectors. In an interview, the TGWU emphasised that "schools are located within communities...people from the communities are employed there. Such proposals will affect them." NEHAWU maintained that redeployment ultimately "goes hand in hand with retrenchment...privatisation is a non-starter." Principals had no idea such proposals were on the table. They referred to the unilateral action taken in 1996 when "We had 24-hour

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security, but the Department pulled it away and told us 'you people had it good!'"

Figures

The GDE is unable to provide accurate figures of how many cleaners and security guards are located at schools. Teachers' experience should provide a warning to the GDE: restructuring exercises should not happen until a proper staff audit has been conducted.

Effect

There are many school cleaners who have worked at a particular school for long periods, some from 20 to 30 years. They are nearing retirement age and have no other employment experience. They would obviously find it difficult to be redeployed to new areas, and would be hard pressed to find alternative employment.

The wages and benefits paid in the private sector are dramatically lower than the public sector. Cleaners in the public service currently earn R1 450 per month. They are also entitled to a pension, medical aid, and in some cases, a housing loan and travel allowance. The wage determination for the private sector lays down a basic wage of R874,66 per month, with no benefits.

Private companies operating in the



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security and cleaning industries – particularly small companies to which the GDE prefers to tender – face a great deal of pressure to reduce costs. They do so most often by cutting labour costs. The contracts which the GDE are offering will be short-term (no more than one year). Small companies will find it difficult to meet even minimum labour standards under these conditions. Many are already notorious for evading standards and discouraging union organising. The result of preferential tendering may well be a degrading of jobs and inequality of conditions of service across Gauteng schools.

Where allocated posts are inadequate for a school's needs, the GDE encourages school governing bodies to hire their own staff. SWOP found examples of governing bodies hiring cleaning and security staff at sub-minimum wages. In one case, a cleaner was hired at a salary of R410 per month for

a 48-hour week. At disadvantaged schools which have only recently elected governing bodies, the capacity to hire and pay non-teaching staff at all is questionable.

Proposals

The GDE must involve relevant stakeholders, particularly trade unions, in restructuring discussions.

SWOP recommends that cleaning not be privatised given the numbers (some 4 000) and tenures of cleaners. Because there are far fewer security guards in schools (some 200), privatising security may provide better service. However, the GDE must first conduct a security needs assessment of each school

Where private contracts are awarded, they should be structured to encourage the growth and sustainability of companies providing good service and labour standards.

Instead of contracting to multiple small businesses, fewer companies could be offered extended contracts based on meeting standards. Contracts should stipulate periodic evaluation by the officials of the Department. Black economic empowerment must not only build black entrepreneurs, but also guarantee decent, sustainable employment for workers in the enterprise.

After all, the standard of cleaning and security affects the environment in which pupils learn and therefore impacts on the quality of education and the culture of learning at schools. ★

This is an edited version of an article prepared for SADTU's newspaper, The Educator's Voice. It is based on research done by Bridget Kenny (SWOP researcher) and Christine Psoullis (SWOP research associate). The full report is available from SWOP.