

**School and district accountability:**

**A dream too far?**

**Presented by:**

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**Paper for CCEAM 2008 Conference**

**'Think Globally Act Locally: A Challenge to Education Leaders'**

**Durban International Conference Centre**

**South Africa**

## **School and district accountability: A dream too far?**

### **Abstract**

The paper examines a school improvement model that has been developed across a number of African countries during the last 7 years. It roots district development and school improvement initiatives in a data-rich approach to school performance monitoring which informs decision-making and attempts to engage departments of education, particularly districts, around effective monitoring and impact on learner outcomes. Using an evidence-based approach allows for a high level of community engagement with active monitoring of their local school, with the effect that teachers and schools improve performance under that pressure and with the necessary support. This has important implications for the contemporary focus in the literature and in multi-lateral agencies on the issues of school quality and learner retention that lie behind the crude focus on access to school which typified EFA and UPE (Lewin 2007). The paper uses two case studies from Ghana and Uganda, where district assemblies have real power over district education policy and the delivery of local schooling, to indicate the importance and potential of this approach, which has direct relevance to South Africa's Integrated Quality Management System. It also draws from evaluations of the model and talks about the potential of the model for replication throughout sub-Saharan Africa. Although the paper is predominantly a practitioner's view it does draw on the relevant literature.

**Key Words: School performance review; school / district improvement**

### **INTRODUCTION**

This paper examines a particular approach to school performance review (SPR) and systemic capacity building in the education system, which is being piloted and refined in a number of African countries in collaboration with national Ministries of Education.

The SPR model provides governments with the very real possibility of making schools and education district offices much more accountable to their clients and to the education system as a whole. It also provides the basis for informed delivery of services by the education authorities and very real chance of informing a move towards *Achievable* Education for All, or AEFA.

This is achieved with indicators and a monitoring and appraisal process that schools accept as being legitimate and reliable. This is important as many top down accountability systems create as much tension and disillusionment as they do accountability, as they use indicators and processes that

teachers do not feel they have any stake in. The danger with accountability systems which are site controlled is they have a tendency of being too soft and open to manipulation such that the system does not trust the results. This is the major problem with the Teacher Appraisal process in South Africa. The SPR, being more technically advanced than most systems, is less open to such bias and has so far been accepted by unions and teachers as valid. The other important element of SPR is that it does not focus on accountability in isolation: it aims to build the capacity of the educators, so provides a level of support along with the accountability. This has the effect of ensuring that teachers do not see the process as threatening or one in which they should try and cheat.

### **WHAT IS THE MISCHIEF?**

The particular need that SPR is responding to is that of a failure of many national education systems in the developing world to look beyond the Millennium Development Goal (# 2 'achieve universal primary education') and EFA commitments. These goals talked of access: that is getting children of school-going age into school.

However, it became clear in the 1990s that getting children in school is not in itself enough, because many – if not most – children dropped out before Grade 4. The early primary school drop-out rate in the countries that LCD works in has been dramatic. In Malawi only 20.6% of children who enter Standard 1 complete the primary cycle, and that figure is 17% for girls. In many schools over 50% drop out in the first two years often because classes have over 200 learners per qualified teacher and in addition learner absenteeism is about 40% (LCD 2008). This leads to two serious issues: firstly children who get less than four years of schooling are very unlikely to maintain their literacy skills into adulthood and about the same number of children are reaching Standard 7 as did prior to the national drives to universal Grade 1 enrolment. Simply put, these children are not benefitting by schooling and are making many previously functional primary schools, dysfunctional.

What governments acknowledge is that they are lacking a system for identifying quality schooling, measuring this quality and providing a process by which quality schooling becomes the norm. This is combined with a failure of many governments, particularly in Africa, to put pressure on schools 'to take responsibility for their learners' performance' (Chinsamy 2002:5). Making schools accountable must involve a two pronged strategy – putting pressure on the schools making them accountable for what they do, and fail to do, while also providing focused and appropriate support.

‘Otherwise schools do not know how to discharge the accountability pressure... if the ... department is pressurising the school to deliver quality learning and teaching and improved learner results, then it needs to support the schools so that they are able to’ (Chinsamy 2002:5).

The focus on the quality of what goes on in the ‘black box’ of the school has become much sharper as the present Grade 1s will be at the top end of the primary system when we reach 2015 when the MDGs will be reported on. In other words if we do not access all children and get them in school in Grade 1 in 2008 and keep them in school until 2015 then we can say goodbye to reaching the goals governments set in 1999 and earlier. This reality is kicking into life a new focus on the quality of what goes on in the classroom and school.

So, the problem is that the focus on access in the MDGs and within the EFA drive has led to a situation where schools have in many countries been flooded with children, without adequate provision of teachers, classrooms and teaching and learning resources. This was not the intention behind the MDGs and EFA.

LCD has been exploring the concept of *Achievable* Education for All (AEFA). The underlying assumption informing AEFA is that enrolment of 100% of all children in school is unrealistic in many countries and not a cost-effective or even possibly a sensible target, in the short term. The argument is that if approximately the same number of children is attaining literacy now as before the opening of schools to all children to achieve EFA, then all the education system is doing is wasting resources, making schools unworkable and doing the children who drop out and who stay in school a disservice. AEFA is based on the argument that it is better to expand access to schools gradually once there are adequate school buildings, teachers, resources and educational standards, so that once children come into school they have an experience which is worthwhile and keeps them in school until they are literate and have the skills they need to be successful in life.

## **WHAT IS SCHOOL PERFORMANCE REVIEW?**

SPR is a simple yet effective method of schools, with district offices, being able to measure their own performance and improvements, against a baseline. It starts from the reality that many schools are

failing but when asked why the teachers and the broader education system seem very unsure as to why they are failing, or even how to define 'failing'. One constantly hears school-based complaints that present-day children are not as bright, are now ill-disciplined and so on. Similarly, district officials and school principals report that teachers are not like they used to be and are not committed.

The need is for a way of measuring school performance that is cost effective and includes every school. The performance measurement needs to be credible and school-controlled. Schools must be able to see at a glance how they are doing against a number of criteria and this must link to planning and district-level delivery.

SPR is a management tool that LCD has been developing, which combines all the main elements of standard integrated quality management systems in education systems. It provides schools and districts with a tool that they can implement based on generation of credible data to inform planning. It is being piloted in the over 4000 schools in Limpopo Province (South Africa) this year and is being used extensively in Uganda and Ghana, and is in a fairly early stage in Ethiopia and Malawi.

The process involves a series of steps. These are:

Step 1: Performance indicators related to school management and leadership, school governance, and teaching and learning are generated with the schools.

Step 2: SPR teams collect data in schools (team is district officials and LCD) supported by LCD and district management.

Step 3: Data collection methods include qualitative and quantitative methods including interviews, classroom observation, document analysis, triangulated with test results and EMIS data.

Step 4: Data is left in school.

Step 5: Data is analysed and consolidated by district.

Step 6: The teachers, School Management Team and district managers all engage with the data and its implications and feed this into their plans.

Step 7: The school community at School Performance Appraisal Meetings (SPAMs) engages with the performance of its own school as part of a discussion and collectively they discuss and agree remedies to identified challenges.

Step 8: Delivery and support by circuit it based on the Circuit Improvement Plan, which is based on data generated through the school visits and other sources, such as standardised tests.

Step 9: Cycle is repeated annually or every two years.

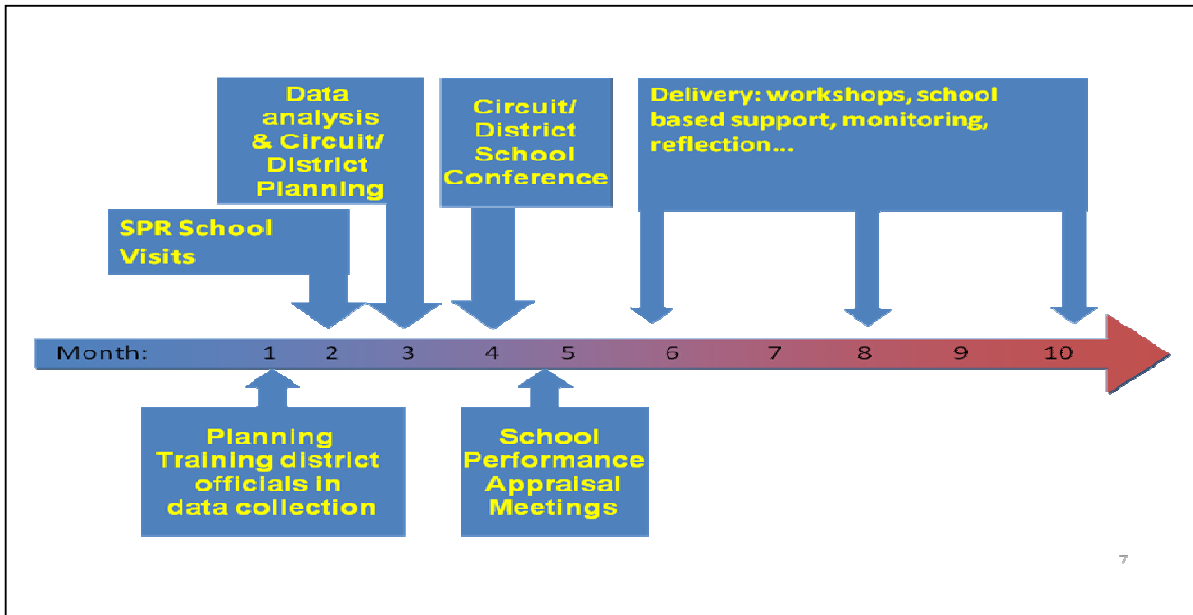


Figure 1: School Performance Review Cycle

### THE SPR CYCLE: HOW DOES IT WORK?

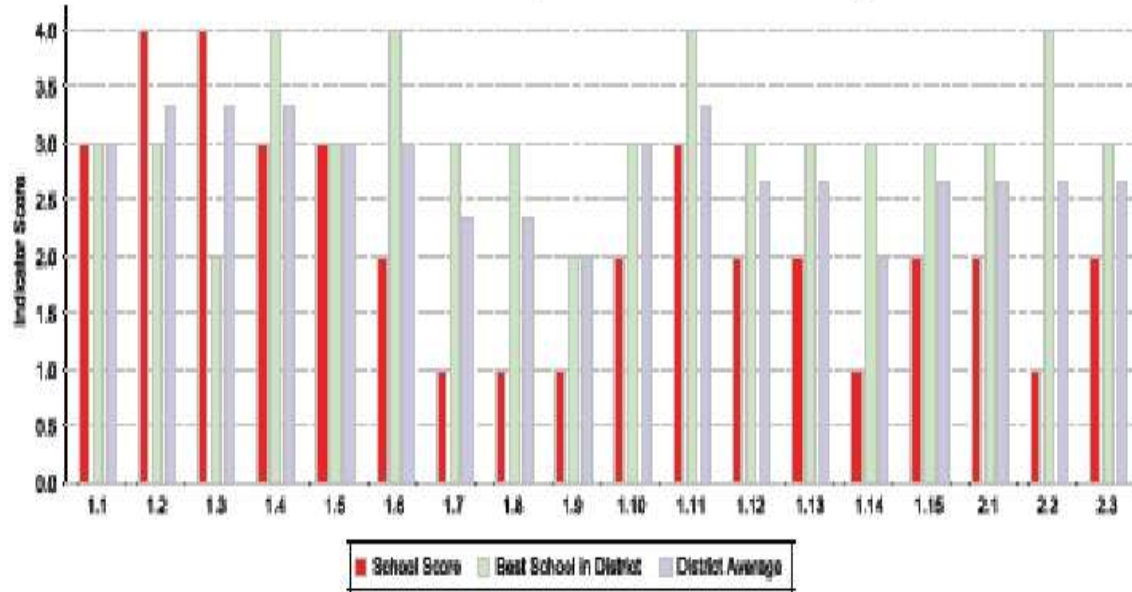
The critical elements of SPR are:

- Use of indicators which are broad-based and mostly generic but are modified to particular environments and situations by those who are to be appraised;
- The training and employment of district officers to do much of the data collection. This creates possibilities for sustainability as it is mainstreamed from the start and is relatively cost effective;
- The approach allows for every school in a system to be appraised once a year or once every two years;
- The use of valid and relatively reliable data to inform planning at all level in the provincial education system, leading to more realistic, targeted and achievable plans.

The data can be presented to schools in various forms, however LCD has increasingly moved towards the presentation of the data in graphic form (see Figure 2) using a four point Likert scale. The values and descriptors applied to each of the four points vary between countries, based on the norm used in that country for monitoring. It is usually expressed as 1 = Not Achieved to 4 = Fully Achieved; or 1 = Weak to 4 = Very Good.

The graphic is left at the school the same day as the SPR appraisal visit, so the learning and evidence is immediately lodged where it is most useful. The graphic is left as a graph (as in Figure 2) or as a thermometer (see Figure 3). This immediate feedback contrasts with many state systemic evaluation systems where the data either reaches the schools over a year later or reaches the school in a consolidated form, which is difficult for the individual school to engage with and implement. LCD has seen that the staff validates data much more readily if it has been collected at the same time that they get the feedback. It certainly creates less room for disputing the evidence and conclusions.

## School Performance Report for Leselo Primary School



### Indicators

1.1 SGB meetings are well-managed and effective  
 1.2 SGB has a clear sense of vision and direction that is shared with all stakeholders

1.3

Members of SGB support school management  
 1.4 Members of SGB support and participate in school life

1.5 Community participates in school improvement  
 1.6 SMT meetings are well-managed and effective  
 1.7 SMT members are capable and focus on learner achievement

1.8 SMT members see their primary task in terms of curriculum management and delivery

1.9 Schools

analyse learner and staff performance and

1.10 Schools implement SDP

1.11 Appropriate school policies are in place and implemented

1.12 Schools have sound financial and resource management systems

1.13 Schools have a timetable and staff deployment adequate to deliver curriculum to all learners within statutory requirements

1.14 Schools secure access and equity for all learners

1.15 Schools are implementing IQMS

Classroom indicators:

1.16 Preparation and planning

1.17 Teaching and learning process

1.18 Assessment recording and reporting

know their strengths and weaknesses and use the information effectively

Figure 2: SPR data for a school

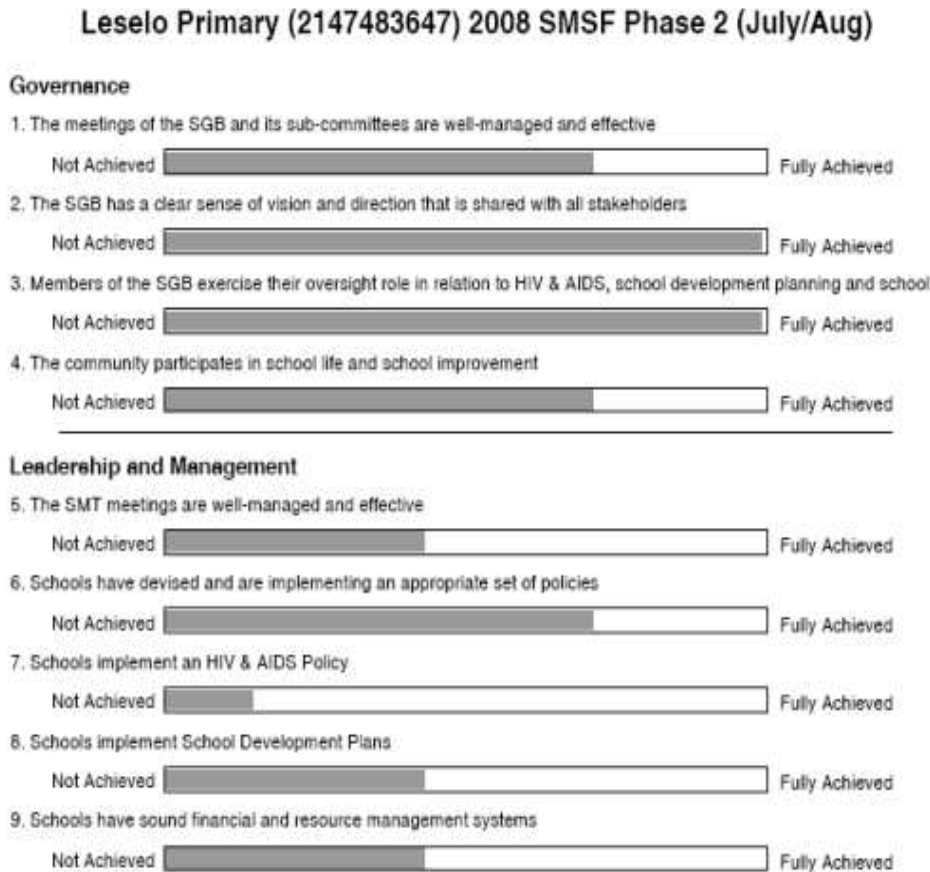


Figure 3: School data presented in a community-accessible format

The room for disputation is also closed by the inclusion of all schools in a system. Schools tend to react against being judged on the basis of other schools which have been included in a sample. Schools argue with some justification that every school is unique and districts and other delivery levels cannot design interventions based on sample information and expect to meet the needs of all schools. With information on all schools in the circuit and district on a database and in a consolidated graphic form (see Figure 4), the circuit and district can plan interventions in a highly targeted way, only attending to those schools where the SPR has shown there is a problem. It also allows districts to prioritise the needs of the district-wide schools based in real-time valid

information, that the schools themselves have provided, and which they will not dispute. The value of this as a planning tool cannot be over-emphasised. Once schools see that the district is receptive and responding to their real needs and not perceived needs, school staff are much more willing to attend and engage in the workshops and other district driven activities. This raises the morale of district staff who see that schools are responding better to their interventions and plans.

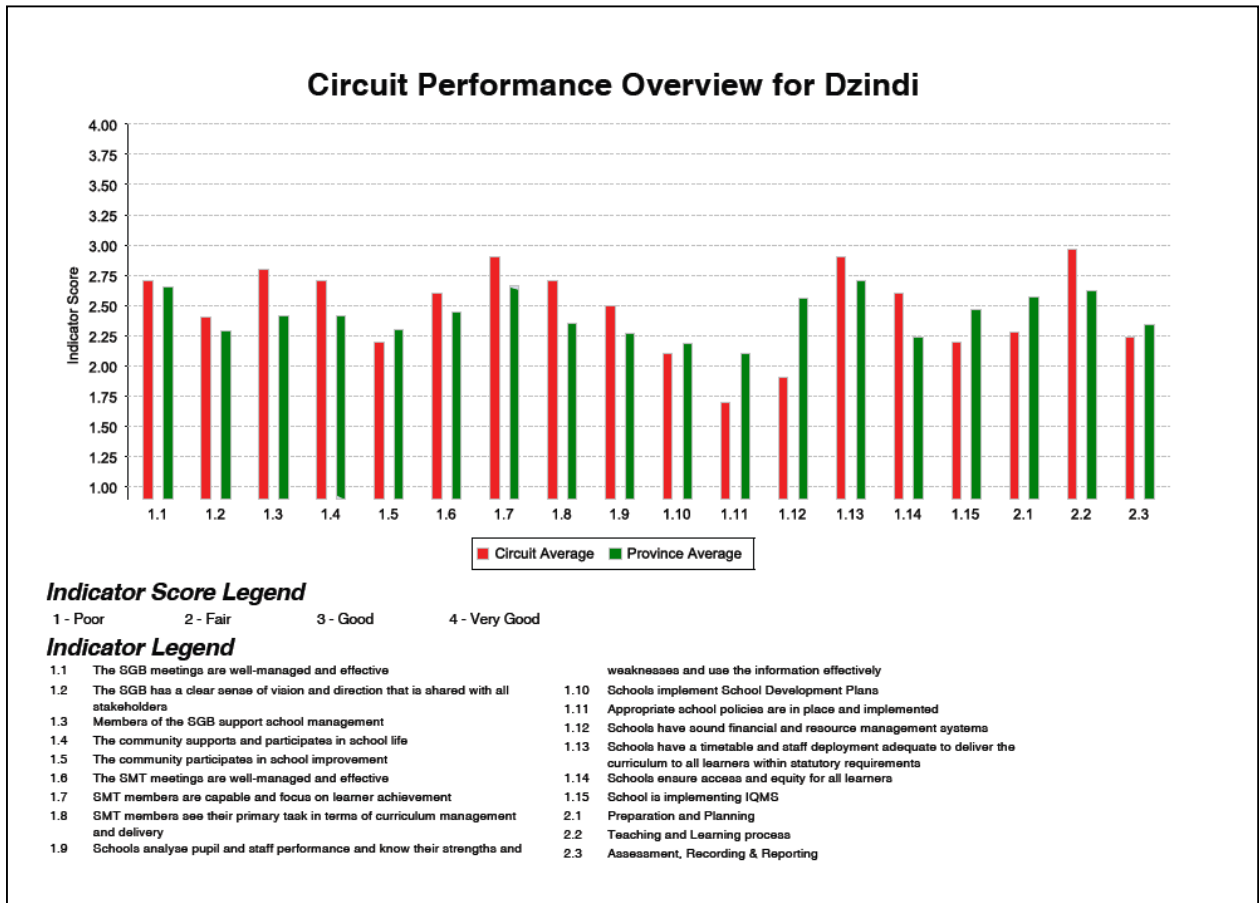


Figure 4: Representation of the performance of all schools in the circuit

#### HOW DOES THIS RELATE TO AEFA?

The crisis that EFA and an all out drive for 100% enrolment in primary schools has visited on many countries' education systems, with a serious shortage of trained teachers, huge classes and very high drop-out rates, has only recently begun to be tracked. The impact of EFA on schools in resource-poor environments is still far from understood and acknowledged – both by the national governments and the donors. There are some interesting research projects being undertaken (Lewin

2007, DFID 2008), which are looking at ways of measuring this situation and remedying it. The work that LCD is undertaking with schools provides the raw data that these projects can use to illustrate the impact of EFA. More important though is that SPR provides tools to assist in remediating this situation.

SPR is implemented in a way that engenders a focus on school quality and creates the space and tools for each school, with its circuit manager or relevant district official, to reflect on the effectiveness of its delivery. This is done through the use of standardised learner tests, a focus on classroom practice and school management. Together these indicators provide a fairly detailed and accurate picture of the quality of learning that is happening in the school. This allows the school, obviously within the constraints of policy, to modify how it will engage with EFA.

Data collected during SPR has influenced practice towards retaining children in school and providing them with a better quality of teaching, e.g. in Malawi where concerns about quality of teaching presented in the data has led to the introduction of local volunteer teachers to increase teacher: learner ratios. The same data is used to inform government and donors as to where school buildings and other facilities are most needed and will have the greatest impact.

Another critical aspect of implementing EFA and making it sustainable must be the involvement of communities – particularly rural communities. It is not enough just to assume that everyone sees the value of education. It is clear in many rural communities this is not the case. If parents see that their children play in school logically these parents will look at the opportunity costs and often withdraw their children so that they can assist in the fields. So, it is imperative that as we talk of AEFA we focus on the parental role. Parents must be able to see that they can influence what happens in the local school and have the right to hold their local school accountable for the quality of education that it delivers. The SPR, with its use of community level school performance appraisal meetings (SPAMs), ensures that parents engage with the data from their school and feed into solutions to the problems that the school is facing. In this way the home – school cultural gap is closed and parents begin to see some value in educating their children: but only as long as the teachers work with the community and implement the measures that have been agreed with the community in the SPAM. Experience shows that community members do use these meetings and are prepared to be critical of their local school, and will monitor initiatives that have been agreed as a result of the SPAM. This is the basis for AEFA.

## **IMPLEMENTATION OF SPR**

SPR is being implemented in slightly different forms in collaboration with Ministries of Education in Ghana, Uganda, Malawi and Ethiopia, as well as in Limpopo Province, in South Africa.

LCD has been quite successful in integrating SPR with government monitoring of schools. In Uganda SPR is undertaken as an integral part of the Directorate of Educational Standards (DES) delivery, while in Ethiopia the model has been picked up in the national policy on school monitoring. In Malawi, Ghana and Limpopo Province the LCD offices are in education departmental offices and LCD staff work closely with their district counterparts.

## **CONCLUSION**

It is therefore possible to hold districts and schools accountable and in a way that they not only respect but even welcome. The model that has been described could be implemented in any country where there is a reasonably strong district or intermediate education structure and where there is political support for decentralisation in education delivery.

The model also talks to a need to redefine the focus on EFA and the MDG #2 which have both led to an unhealthy obsession with getting children in Grade 1 irrespective of whether they drop out within months of starting school because the quality of the experience is so terrible. The focus should be shifted to Achievable Education for All. AEFA depends for its success on strong school level accountability to the community and the district office, and in turn a real community and district commitment to the local school and its improvement. If SPR is used to regularly appraise schools and as a planning tool then one can stagger full enrolment over a number of years, while ensuring that as children are enrolled they receive a quality of education that they and their parents are likely to respect.

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