

South Africa: Fix the education system and wipe the smile off Verwoerd's face

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The legacy of racial discrimination in the South African education system, characterised by poor outcomes, overcrowded classrooms, inadequate facilities and learning materials for tens of thousands of students, still looms large 25 years into freedom, Amnesty International said today as it launched a new campaign #SignTheSmileOff.



The campaign highlights that despite the post independent government's promises to erase the impacts of the Bantustan Education system and ensure that every child receives a quality education, South Africa's education system is still unequal.

The campaign warns that unless the South African Government seriously tackles the issues that prevent children from receiving a quality education, they will be fulfilling the legacy of apartheid.

From today, and for the next couple of weeks, smiling images of Hendrik Verwoerd, the original “architect of apartheid”, will be seen around Johannesburg. The campaign urges members of the public who care about the provision of quality education to “sign the smile off Verwoerd’s face” by demanding that South Africa’s leaders urgently provide all children with the decent quality, basic education that is their birth right as enshrined in the constitution. By signing the smile off Verwoerd’s face the public will add their names to a petition that calls on the government to fix the problems in education by 2021.

“More than two decades after the end of apartheid, South Africa’s education system still mirrors the apartheid years, with many schools serving our poorest communities relying on outdated and poorly maintained infrastructure and a dire lack of teaching resources that provides a wholly inadequate learning space for young people. While South Africa has made progress in providing access to education it has yet to tackle the deeply entrenched legacy of apartheid, left by Hendrick Verwoerd, that continues to result in massive inequalities in the country’s education system,” said Shenilla Mohamed, executive director of Amnesty International South Africa.

“Our vision is simple. All children have the right to a quality primary and secondary education. Being able to read and do simple maths can assist in helping children get better jobs which will break the poverty cycle and provide them with the hope of building a better future.”

The campaign highlights how 78% of South Africa’s 10-year-old learners cannot read, and 61% of 11-year-old schoolchildren cannot do basic mathematics. Pupils at 17% per cent of the country’s schools are still forced to use highly dangerous and unsanitary pit latrines, leading to several tragic deaths by drowning in recent years. Currently half of the around [1.2 million learners enrolled](#) in Grade 1 every year drop out by Grade 12. Only 14% of pupils that enter the country’s school system will qualify for university.

Recognising that these problems are entrenched and wide-spread, Amnesty International believes that they are fixable by any government with the determination and political will to set the right targets, ensure that they are met, monitor them rigorously and take the necessary remedial action.

“There is need for accountability. South Africa is obliged under international human rights law to provide all public schools with sufficient resources to enable the children to enjoy their right to a decent education. This includes equipping them with basic skills in reading and mathematics. Children also need to be in a safe environment with adequate infrastructure. In our campaign we are calling on the state to replace all school pit latrines with safe, clean toilets. No child should be exposed to the risk of death or injury while at school,” said Shenilla Mohamed.

Kumi Naidoo, a South African who joined Amnesty International as Secretary General in August 2018, is a firm advocate for the right to quality education. “Our campaign rightly points out that if the man who created apartheid looked back now, he’d be smiling,” said Kumi Naidoo. “By coming together and taking action now we can increase pressure on the state to deliver a quality education and wipe the smile off Verwoerd’s face and erase his legacy forever.”

“Learning from the past is vital to understanding our present. However, Amnesty International’s ultimate goal with this campaign is to ensure that every child in South Africa is given a hope for the future by receiving a quality education.”

For more information on the petition, please visit [#signthesmileoff](#) or follow Amnesty International South Africa on [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#) and [Facebook](#).

About Amnesty International SA

Amnesty International is a Nobel Peace Prize-winning global movement of more than 7 million people who campaign for a world where human rights are enjoyed by all. The organization investigates and exposes abuses, educates and mobilizes the public, and works to protect people wherever justice, freedom, truth and dignity are denied.

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