

## Education: Do we give a damn?

By Russell Pollitt SJ

While President Jacob Zuma prattled on about fixing the mistakes of the past, unity within the ANC and (ironically) fighting corruption during the party's January 8th birthday celebrations, another crisis loomed: basic education.

This week the Gauteng Basic Education Department announced that 58,000 learners are not placed at a school. They blamed late applications for this. Gauteng MEC for Education, Panyaza Lesufi, said that some learners may have to wait until the end of February to be placed. Nothing like losing the first month of school... Spokesperson for the Department, Oupa Bodibe, then said that "there is no need for concern".

South Africa faces multiple social, economic and political challenges. One of the key ways of working towards dealing with these issues is through education. Education should be one of the foremost priorities for the country. Yet, from what we have heard this week, it is clear, once again, that, at best, a mediocre attitude permeates our society. At worst, we don't give a damn. To say that we should not be concerned about the fact that thousands of children could miss up to six weeks of the new academic year is, quite frankly, absurd. We should be very worried.

Just a few weeks ago we were told we should feel good because the national matric pass rate went from 70.7% in 2015 to 72.5% in 2016. The "system is on the rise" – the Department of Education (DoE) said. This claim warrants further interrogation. The pass rate does not tell us whether education is moving in the right direction or how learners are doing in subjects that are critical for the future of the country. The pass rate tells us how many learners passed from those who wrote matric. Nobody knows how many learners dropped out of school. In the Free State in 2014, for example, 55,000 learners enrolled in Grade 10. In 2016, only 26,600 wrote matric.

Every year the DoE faces the same enrolment problems. Rewind the tape and play it again. One would have thought, by now, they would have better mechanisms in place for dealing with this problem. Unsurprisingly, the online application process seems to have been problematic – many don't have online access in SA.

However, we cannot blame the DoE only. While many parents are diligent and, against the odds (including a system that stymies them), do their best to register children for school, there are some who do nothing. It seems incomprehensible that any parent, looking out for the good of their offspring, would do nothing about ensuring that their children are registered to begin the academic year. How can one do absolutely nothing to secure your child's future? The mind boggles. The 'couldn't give a damn' attitude triumphs, it seems, amongst some parents/guardians too. Could this be the harvest we reap when we lower the pass rate to 30%?

The Code of Canon Law states that parents have the "most grave obligation" to ensure their children's upbringing. Education is an obligation. Do parents realise their obligations and rights or, like many of our political leaders, have they too decided that they just don't care?