



Written by [Michael Tennant](#) on January 3, 2011

Let Down by Public Schools, South Africa's Poor Educated by the Free Market

That well describes government in general: weak management, poor results, and inefficiency. By contrast, the free market rewards those businesses with strong leaders and productive, efficient workforces. Hence, it comes as no surprise that the market is succeeding where the state has failed, providing a good education even — perhaps especially — for poor South Africans.



For example, Dintle Zulu, unwilling to inflict what Bryson describes as “the worn classrooms, demoralized teachers and defiant students she had faced herself” on her daughter, Samantha, enrolled her in an elite private school several years ago. Unable to afford the expensive tuition for long — “private schools for the rich can easily run to more [sic] than \$1,000 a month,” Bryson explains — Zulu switched Samantha to Progressive Primary School, which charges about \$50 a month, five years ago. The education Samantha received at Progressive was good enough to earn her acceptance at “a competitive public high school with an emphasis on science and technology,” says Bryson.

Progressive was formed in 1991 when parents persuaded teachers from an out-of-business Christian school to start their own school — apparently a common occurrence in South Africa. The school’s motto, “Let us shape your child into a top achiever,” is clearly more than just a marketing tool. Bryson writes that the school “has sent graduates — with scholarships — on to some of Johannesburg’s most demanding high schools.” She continues:

When he speaks of his years at Progressive, Victor Tshilombo, 24, now a second-year medical student at Johannesburg’s premier University of Witwatersrand, keeps returning, a note of astonishment in his voice, to the fact that he spoke no English when he arrived. He had been passed from year to year at his previous public school. Progressive teachers put him back five grades, and embarked on intensive lessons.

Tshilombo said he developed determination and confidence. That was important after he graduated from an elite Johannesburg public high school, when he had to work for two years as an army ambulance dispatcher because he did not have the money to go to medical school. Finally,



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Witwatersrand offered him a scholarship.

When he becomes a doctor and starts a family, he'll be able to afford more expensive schools, but he does not believe he'll find better than Progressive. He remembers the attention he got when he struggled, even though "my father wasn't rich. I don't think he even paid school fees on time."

In fact, that emphasis on providing an education for the poor that is equal to that of the rich is one of the things that motivates private school teachers, who, just as in most Western countries, earn much less than their public school counterparts. Progressive head teacher Sonja Kruger, noting the increase in the number of private schools in the neighborhood, "says the competition is good for poor kids," according to Bryson. "I don't see why, because they don't have money, their education shouldn't be as good as anyone else's," she said."

Demanding parents also play a role in ensuring their children get a good education, changing schools if the results do not meet with their approval — an option available to very few poor parents in the United States, where the state's near monopoly on education crowds out most private alternatives. "As a result," writes Bryson, "the entrepreneurs who run such schools keep classes small and show little patience with teachers who don't perform, even if, to keep costs down, many of the teachers don't have the qualifications to work in public schools." (Good luck trying to [fire an incompetent teacher](#) in the New York City public school system.)

As noted above, however, these supposedly unqualified teachers are turning out graduates at least the equal of those in the government schools. And as a research team from the Centre for Development and Enterprise reported, the private schools are "significantly better in some areas," even though a quarter of them are technically illegal, having not registered with the government, and therefore can offer "no guarantee state standards are being met," Bryson says.

One might think that such rousing success in providing a quality education for people at the lowest rungs of society would be cause for nothing but celebration. Ah, but one must reckon with the statist, to whom everything — and especially the opportunity to shape the minds of the young — rightfully belongs to the state. Thus Bryson notes the familiar refrain:

Critics worry that such schools will only widen the gap between the haves and have-nots, as the most committed parents and the most promising students leave already troubled public schools for private ones. They also worry that governments will turn over the bulk of the responsibility of education to private schools, wealthy or poor.

"If the public system does not work for the poor, it is a failed state, then you're letting the market take over something that's basic and fundamental," said Wongani Grace Nkhoma of the Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa. "States have to understand that they have the responsibility to provide education that's of good quality, to every child."

So parents who care about their children's education should, in the minds of these critics, not be given the option to seek better schooling outside the state system. Worse yet, the market cannot be permitted to "take over something that's basic and fundamental," even though the market, when it is allowed to function, provides such basic needs as clothes and food in abundance. Yet these people have the audacity to claim that they are acting in the best interest of the children!

Not only should private schools be permitted to exist in greater and greater numbers in South Africa, but public schools ought to be abolished there and everywhere else. As Dr. Sam Blumenfeld, self-described "advocate of full educational freedom," [argued recently in *The New American*](#), the country



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that does away with government schools will “probably become the best-educated nation in the world. Why? Because when parents are in charge of their own children’s education, they will seek the best they can get.” “Total educational freedom in the colonies,” Blumenfeld points out, produced the generation of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison. Practically no educational freedom for the past century, on the other hand, has produced such luminaries as Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama — men unfit even to powder the wigs of the Founders. (Bush and Obama did receive significant private schooling, which undoubtedly gave them an advantage over their poorer contemporaries, providing yet another reason — more competition for leadership positions — to extend such an advantage to all.)

Here’s to the free market and the educational opportunities it is providing for South Africans of all socioeconomic backgrounds. Now let’s extend those opportunities to more South Africans — and to everyone else.

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