

Free to learn: The School Fee Exemption policy and the National School Nutrition Programme

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Education is a basic right. Section 29 (1) (a) of the South African Constitution states that “everyone has the right to a basic education, including adult basic education”. Through the South African Schools Act of 1996, the national Department of Education has made educational attendance compulsory for all children aged seven to 15 (or the completion of Grade 9). Compulsory education places a responsibility not only on parents or caregivers¹ to send their children to school, but also on the State to ensure that schools are accessible and affordable.

In South Africa, where the majority of children live in poverty, lack of money can be a barrier to schooling. This essay discusses two government policies designed to make education affordable to poor children. These are the School Fee Exemption policy and the No-fee Schools policy. Children at schools in poor areas are also able to access the National School Nutrition Programme, which is also discussed here.

The information in this essay comes from *The Means to Live: Targeting poverty alleviation to realise children's rights*, the forthcoming report on a three-year research project of the Child Poverty Programme at the Children's Institute, University of Cape Town. The *Means to Live Project* aims to investigate how government poverty alleviation programmes are targeted and the consequences of the targeting for children and their caregivers – particularly where it results in very poor children being excluded from programmes. This essay is an abridged version of the more comprehensive discussion of the School Fee Exemption policy and the National School Nutrition Programme in the full *Means to Live* report, to be released in 2007. (See the essay starting on page 31 for more details on this research project.)

This essay focuses on the following questions:

- What is the School Fee Exemption policy?
- What are no-fee schools?
- Why has the School Fee Exemption policy not been implemented?
- Who is excluded from the School Fee Exemption and the No-fee Schools policies?
- What is the National School Nutrition Programme?
- Who is eligible for school feeding, and are they being fed?
- How does school feeding work in practice?
- Who is excluded from school feeding?
- What are the conclusions?

What is the School Fee Exemption policy?

Public schooling is funded from public revenue, and is supplemented through school fees and/or school fundraising. The South African Schools Act of 1996 provided for an exemption so that school fees could be formally waived for learners from poor families.

The School Fee Exemption policy says that each school, through its school governing body (SGB), must determine fees and inform parents and caregivers about the exemption policy. The *Exemption of Parents from the Payment of School Fees Regulations* of 1998 set out a mandatory minimum means test for the granting of exemptions. During the *Means to Live* research period, the means test read as follows: “If the combined annual gross income of the parents is less than ten times the annual school fees per learner, the parent

¹ Caregivers are those who undertake the primary responsibility for parenting children from day to day. In most, but not all, cases, this is the child's biological mother. Many children are cared for by grandparents, siblings, other relatives, or non-relatives. In the *Means to Live*, specific criteria were used to define one primary caregiver per child to replicate assessments of eligibility. In reality, however, care arrangements are often shared between parents or other household members.

qualifies for full exemption." Partial exemptions were available for those whose income was more than ten times but less than thirty times the annual fees.

Eligibility for full and partial school fee exemptions is therefore determined on the basis of parental income in relation to the fees.

New regulations released in October 2006 have modified the formula for calculating exemptions. In particular, the new formula takes into account the number of school-going children supported by a caregiver, and provides explicit guidelines for calculating the amount of partial exemptions. In terms of the new funding norms, certain categories of children are automatically exempt from paying fees. These include Child Support Grant beneficiaries and children in foster care.

What are no-fee schools?

In terms of the regulations, the national Department of Education allocates each school a poverty ranking derived from national data on income levels, dependency ratios and literacy rates in the surrounding community. The No-fee Schools policy abolishes school fees in the poorest 40% of schools nationally for learners from Grade R to Grade 9. Schools that do not charge fees will be allocated a larger amount of funding per learner to make up for the fees that would have been charged. Children in high schools will not benefit from the no-fee policy.

The No-Fee policy uses a spatial method of targeting, where school rankings are determined in relation to the level of poverty in the surrounding area. This presupposes that all poor learners live in poor areas, and that learners come from the area around the school. For many reasons, ranging from logistical necessity to choices about quality of education, some poor children go to school in wards that are not rated amongst the poorest. These children will therefore be in fee-paying schools.

The No-fee Schools policy, although implemented in some provinces during 2006, remains to be implemented nationally in 2007. The research focus of the *Means to Live* was on the implementation of school fee exemptions. The national list of no-fee schools for 2007, gazetted on 1 December 2006, shows that all primary schools in the rural *Means to Live* sites will have no-fee status from 2007. Nevertheless, the research points to some generic issues in the conceptualisation and implementation of the School Fee Exemption policy, and some of the systemic issues outlined in this essay may continue to affect children attending no-fee schools.

Why has the School Fee Exemption policy not been implemented?

High eligibility, but no implementation

The *Means to Live* research was undertaken in two sites – an urban site in the Western Cape, and a rural one in the Eastern Cape province – both selected specifically for being very poor areas. At the time of the research the School Fee Exemption was the only policy to remove fees for poor children. The research team set out to discover what proportion of children in these sites would be eligible for a fee exemption at their schools. To do this, the researchers replicated the means test for all surveyed children, using the reported income of their caregivers and the verified fees charged by the schools they attended. Although fees were set fairly low (more than nine out of 10 children incurred annual school fees under R300 per year), the depth of poverty meant that eligibility rates were high.

Over half (57%) of the children in the urban site would have been eligible for a full or partial exemption from school fees at the schools they were attending, and an overwhelming 80% of school-age children in the rural site would qualify for an exemption – if it were implemented at their schools. But actual uptake of the exemption was almost zero.

The national picture is the same: Fiske and Ladd's review of the implementation of this policy in 2003 found that only 2.5% of families with learners in primary school and 3.7% of families with learners in high school received fee exemptions. These are very low rates when considering the high levels of child poverty in South Africa.

Poor awareness of the policy

As was indicated by Fiske and Ladd, the *Means to Live* also found that awareness of the School Fee Exemption policy amounted to little more than rumour for many people. Despite being required to do so, schools had largely failed to inform parents of the policy. The new regulations of 2006 have attempted to improve awareness of the exemption policy by compelling schools to inform parents about the policy each year.

School funding and quality of education

Non-implementation of the fee exemption by schools is not simply about schools failing to do their job; it is the result of a systemic problem in the conceptualisation of the programme. The Department of Education has not budgeted

to compensate schools for loss of revenue through the exemption policy. In fact, there has been no budget for this policy, no central monitoring of whether fee exemptions have been granted and to whom, no plans or targets for how many learners should be able to access a fee waiver, and no requirement for schools to budget with any estimation of the number of exemptions to be granted. There are also no sanctions against schools that fail to implement the policy.

Even if schools were forced to implement the policy, it would result in a net loss of income to them, which in turn may severely compromise the quality of education. Schools cannot run optimally without income over and above the government subsidies. Rolling out the School Fee Exemption policy would in effect mean that schools would have less money to maintain buildings, buy furniture and books and employ more staff to reduce learner-to-educator ratios.

The many costs of schooling

Many of the secondary costs of education will not be removed with the introduction of fee exemptions or no-fee schools, although funding may be sufficient to pay for essential books and stationery. Apart from school fees, caregivers bear the burden of other costs associated with schooling. The *Means to Live* found that school fees amounted to less than 20% of all reported educational expenses paid by surveyed caregivers for the year. The Department of Education is currently developing guidelines on uniforms and transport, which may alleviate some of the additional costs.

What are the consequences of non-implementation for caregivers and children?

The *Means to Live* found that caregivers were very committed to their children's education – reported attendance rates were high, and the majority of caregivers had paid at least part of their children's school fees by September, even if this meant cutting costs in other areas. However, they referred to the trade-off between school fees and other necessities, such as food. A caregiver's hardship to pay for her children's schooling is illustrated in the case study below.

Not only had schools not implemented the Schools Fee Exemption policy, but a number of unlawful approaches to the collection of fees were reported. Fee collection strategies recorded by the *Means to Live* and other research include sending learners home to collect money on grant pay-day, thereby implying that fees should be paid from social grants. It is nonsensical to require the poor to access a poverty alleviation benefit from one government department, just to pay it back to another. If this were the intention, direct inter-departmental transfers would be a more appropriate mechanism.

The amended funding norms have made the policy intention explicit: from 2007, all beneficiaries of child grants are automatically exempt from school fees. As with the rest of the exemption policy, the extent to which schools apply this policy may depend largely on the extent to which the department monitors and enforces it.

CASE STUDY 2: Nonzwakazi* begs for school fees

Nonzwakazi lives with her husband, five of her own children and her sister's child in a subsidy house at Kuyasa, on the edge of Khayelitsha. They have no regular income besides the Child Support Grants for the children. Nonzwakazi begs to earn money, using a borrowed "paper from the church" authorising the bearer to collect money.

"Sometimes it's 50 cents, one rand, or when I get to a white person perhaps she gives me R5... If you give me clothes then you give me clothes, and if you give me food then you give me food, maybe pull old bread from your fridge ... maybe you give me 50c because you don't have money. I accept it; I take it and put it in my pocket. ... It takes the whole day of course. I'm like a working person; I work in that way, and sometimes I am able to get school fees for the children and things like that."

Five of her children are attending school. They are all eligible for full school fee exemptions, but Nonzwakazi was not aware that such a policy existed. She does complicated budgeting with the school fees:

"Now with the school fees, here this year I paid R200, R100 and R100 there, and this one was paid by my brother [in-law] – he paid for me this year ... and here I have debt with all of them, I haven't even started with these ones ... I'm still battling, I have debt at the school..."

* All names have been changed to protect identities.

Source: Hall K, Leatt A & Rosa S (forthcoming) *The Means to Live: Targeting poverty alleviation to realise children's rights*. Cape Town: Children's Institute, UCT.

Other mechanisms found to be used by schools to enforce fee payments include withholding school reports and transfer letters, corporal punishment, public humiliation, and the exclusion of learners from school. While often effective in extracting money from the poor, these strategies to elicit payment are unlawful, and they violate children's constitutional right to education.

Who is excluded from the School Fee Exemption and the No-fee Schools policies?

Children not at school

Of course, the no-fee and fee exemption policies are only available to those children who are actually attending school. Analysis of data from the *General Household Survey 2005* (GHS) shows that 20% of South Africa's children who are of primary school age and 33% of those who are of high school age live far away from the nearest school. This is more of a problem for children in rural areas than those in cities.

In the rural *Means to Live* site, for example, each of the three villages had a primary school, but two of these schools were not functioning properly. One was frequently closed by mid-morning, and the other school was not open at all during the last phase of the research. There is no secondary school for children in any of the villages.

Older learners

Results of the *Means to Live* survey illustrate a national pattern where education at high school level tends to be more expensive than primary school education. The No-fee Schools policy will apply only to learners from Grade R to Grade 9, while those in Grades 10 to 12 will continue to pay fees, even if they live in the poorest intake areas. Statistics from the GHS 2005 show that children's attendance rates at educational institutions are very high – around 98% for all ages between eight and 14 years. However, from age 15 onwards, children's attendance rates drop dramatically, reaching a low of 85% at 17 years.

Table 9 shows the reasons why children in South Africa aged 14 – 17 years do not attend school, as captured in the *General Household Survey 2005*.

TABLE 9: Reasons for children aged 14 – 17 years not attending school

Reason	%
No money for fees	37
Education is useless	17
Family commitments (e.g. child-minding)	8
Failed	8
Illness	8
Pregnancy	7
Working	5
School is too far away	2
Finished studies	1
Other/no response	7
Total	100

Source: Statistics South Africa (2006) *General Household Survey 2005*. Pretoria, Cape Town: Statistics South Africa. Analysis by Debbie Budlender, Centre for Actuarial Research, UCT.

Clearly, cost is one of the main obstacles to completing secondary education. Fifty percent of all reasons for non-attendance relate to the cost of schooling or the need to work – either in a job or in the home. This suggests that a combination of fee waivers and income support for children over 14 years could reduce by up to half the number of all teenagers who quit school.

Caregivers in the *Means to Live* talked about the higher costs of secondary school as being particularly problematic because the age of high-school learners coincides with the cut-off age of 14 years for the Child Support Grant.

I wish the government could help until the child finishes school. Because now, when you have a child who is not the grant age, you take that child out of school even if she's still studying, because you have no means for that child. [CAREGIVER, RURAL SITE]

Although education in South Africa is compulsory only up to Grade 9 or 15 years, there are many social and economic reasons why it is desirable for children to complete their schooling. On average, only one in 10 children in the *Means to Live* survey had caregivers who had completed their schooling. The results suggest an association between education and child poverty, in that the lower the

² Gender-specific pronouns such as "her" and "she" are used interchangeably with "his" and "he" although, in the majority of cases, caregivers are women.

educational attainment of the caregiver, the lower the mean per capita income for the children in her² care.

Whether they drop out in high school due to higher costs, or are too young to go to school, or live in areas where schools don't operate as they should, children who do not have access to school also lose their access to government programmes that are implemented through schools – such as the National School Nutrition Programme.

What is the National School Nutrition Programme?

The National School Nutrition Programme – sometimes referred to as the school feeding scheme – aims to foster better quality education by:

- enhancing children's active learning capacity;
- alleviating short-term hunger;
- providing an incentive for children to attend school regularly and punctually; and
- addressing certain micro-nutrient deficiencies.

School feeding is a small part of the Integrated Food Security Strategy for South Africa, which was introduced in 2002 and involves the Departments of Health, Social Development, Land Affairs and Agriculture. The school feeding programme is therefore just one of a range of projects that respond to nutritional needs, and does not claim to respond comprehensively to poor nutrition, hunger or food security.

Who is eligible for school feeding, and are they being fed?

The targeting of the National School Nutrition Programme works in two ways. First, whole schools are selected for funding for this programme. Within selected schools, learners are selected by age or grade or some other criteria for feeding. The minimum policy is to feed all Grades from R up to Grade 7 for 156 out of approximately 196 school days per year.

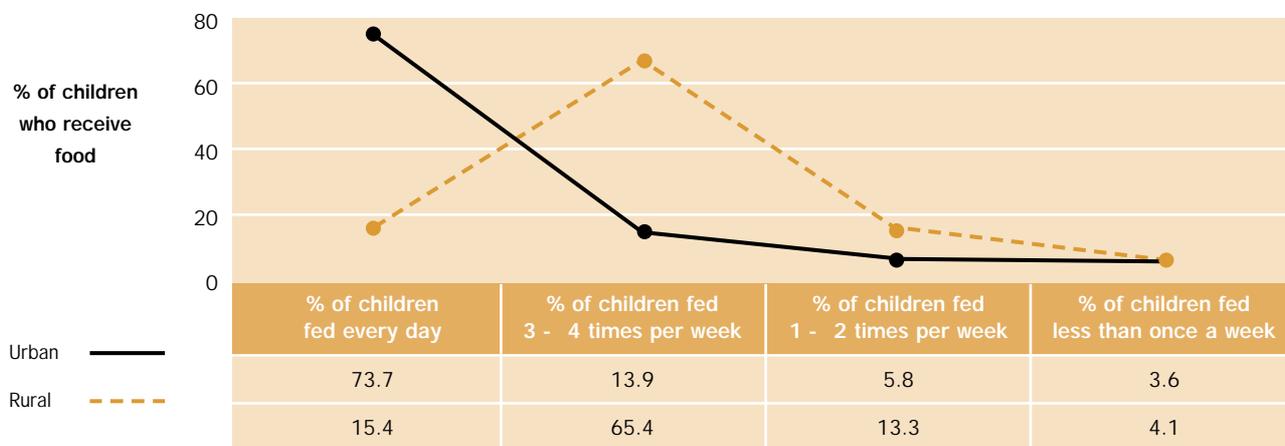
The *Means to Live* research found that levels of access to school feeding varied considerably across the rural and urban sites. Figure 3 indicates the frequency of school feeding at the research sites. Overall, while 90% of eligible children (those attending school up to Grade 7) were reported to be receiving free food at school in the rural site, only 56% of eligible children in the urban site were receiving food. On the other hand, urban children who were receiving food at school got it more regularly than those in the rural site.

How does school feeding work in practice?

Although the National School Nutrition Programme provides only a small amount of food – regarded by some caregivers as being insufficient – it helps to relieve child hunger and also relieves poor caregivers from some of the burden of worry when they are unable to provide enough food for their children.

FIGURE 3: Frequency of school feeding at the *Means to Live* sites

(Base: Children who receive food at schools in *Means to Live* sites)



Source: Hall K, Leatt A & Rosa S (forthcoming) *The Means to Live: Targeting poverty alleviation to realise children's rights*. Cape Town: Children's Institute, UCT.

I want to say that, after we had voted for the ANC, there is development that we see in South Africa; even the children at school are eating. A child doesn't come back from school hungry. [CAREGIVER, URBAN SITE]

The *Means to Live* research however points to a number of issues related to implementation of school feeding that impact on children:

Not everything on the menu: While there are 22 approved meal plans, the Western and Eastern Cape provinces have chosen “cold” menu plans that don't require cooking facilities. The menu consists of brown bread with margarine, peanut butter and jam, served with a powered milkshake supplement enriched with micro-nutrients. In practice, it appears that children do not always receive all the food that is officially allocated. While the urban schools reported that their stocks were sufficient to provide food regularly, the rural schools did not always have all the ingredients available.

Food disappears: Parents talk of food disappearing from schools. One caregiver, who worked at a primary school, was explicit about the fact that she and other staff members steal the food for their own children.

No system of accounting to parents: One of the limitations of the school feeding programme is that there seems to be no system of accountability to the parent body. Many caregivers do not know whether their children receive food regularly. Some say that all children in the class receive food, others believe that the programme is only for children whose parents are unemployed, or only for orphaned children.

Environmental constraints: A number of contextual factors are constraining the proper implementation of school feeding in the *Means to Live* rural site. As mentioned, schools do not always operate properly, closing half-way through the morning or not opening at all. During the rainy season the roads in the rural site can become impassable – meaning the bread truck cannot get through to deliver bread and school feeding cannot happen. The milkshakes require water and schools without potable water reported children with diarrhoea.

Who is excluded from school feeding?

As with the No-fee Schools and School Fee Exemption policies, children living in areas where schools are too far and/or not operating are practically excluded from the National School Nutrition Programme. But there are also exclusions inherent in the design of this programme. For a start, young

children under six years old who are not yet at school cannot access food through the programme.

There is currently no government-funded nutrition programme at high schools, although it has been reported that some provincial departments have used discretionary funding for this purpose.

What are the conclusions?

The School Fee Exemption policy has largely not been implemented and the poorest of caregivers still struggle to pay school fees, sometimes out of their children's grants or their own pensions. Implementation failure is largely the result of systemic constraints such as the lack of budget to compensate schools for implementing the policy and the absence of monitoring mechanisms to enforce it. The consequences of non-implementation for children are high, particularly in high schools, where 50% of drop-outs are related to affordability.

The No-fee Schools policy will abolish fees for primary schools in the poorest 40% of wards. But the exclusion of high school learners from this policy must be noted, particularly as drop-out rates increase in this age group. Children unable to access school also lose out on the National School Nutrition Programme, which provides some relief from hunger for the poorest children, although high school children are also excluded from this programme.

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