

Why the Government has taken over the running of Community Junior Secondary Schools?

At the beginning of January 2004, the government took over the complete running of Community Junior Secondary Schools known as (CJSS). This move has not had the public debate that it perhaps deserves given the far reaching implications of the step. There was some media comment which did not do justice to the issue and focused on the positive aspects of the issue. Perhaps the most pertinent question regarding the issue is the motivation for the take over. Why has the government found it imperative to effect a take over of CJSS in such a hasty fashion?

There is not doubt that there are advantages to be gained from this move. One of the major beneficiaries of this move is the non-teaching staff. They will gain in terms of the improved conditions of service like pension, medical aid, transfers, promotions, and all benefits that come on the way of public officers. So is this move a result of pressure by Manual Workers Union or the embryonic union of the staff of CJSS? We have not been told and it does not seem likely that this is the case. It has been suggested that the take over was partly in response to a resolution of secondary school heads in some long forgotten secondary schools heads conference. It is doubtful if the government takes seriously the sentiments of school heads conference. After all the Heads Conference has no political clout to talk of. Primary school teachers have long been crying for the take over of their schools by the Ministry of Education, without any success. The mention of the head masters resolution that CJSS be taken over seems to be more of convenient collusion.

What are some of the issues that the take over is supposed to address? One of the issues that have been raised is the improvement in the quality and control of public funds. Admittedly the government has a very elaborate if cumbersome procedure for supplies and finance. During the formative period of the CJSS there were serious inadequacies in the system, which was exploited by some administrators to personal advantage. Over time controls have been tightened up, transparency introduced in procurement of goods and services, the Procurement and Disposal of Public Assets Act applies to CJSS and the Corruption and Economic Crime is there, to mention but a few instruments. So why the take over?

It is a given that the country is experiencing very serious budgetary constraints, with prospects of budget deficits running into the billions of Pula. The government has sent out word that we all must tighten our belts. Issues of cost saving, cost sharing and cost recovery are the buzz words from the Ministry of Finance and the whole Government enclave. Against this background it begs the question of in what way is the take over of CJSS in the interest of cost saving? I want to argue that the decentralized and localized system that obtains in the CJSS was more cost effective and efficient. It made institutions to be accountable and

conscious of expenditure. Schools and their administrators are much more cost conscious of the funds allocated to them. The system rewarded those institutions which made savings by allowing them to keep their savings which they could use in elective projects (subject to approval by the authorities). Now schools will be racing against time to finish their allocations before the end of the financial year as is common in Government Institutions. The downside to this is that there were those schools that became preoccupied with making savings at the detriment of providing a quality teaching and learning experience for students. To me this could be handled by addressing errant schools without taking over the schools. One of the major benefits of the old system is with regard to efficiency. Unless we do not value time as a cost. The old system of procurement of goods and services is more efficient in that it uses the private sector. The schools procured goods like petrol from private service providers, with their longer hours of operation. Obviously government fuel providers like CTO obtain fuel at a discounted rate because bulk purchasing. The downside is that CTO has very limited operating hours, and it is going to be a logistical nightmare for schools to arrange for fuel during weekend activities. Not impossible, but cumbersome! The same could be said about the financial issues whereby the schools will now be serviced by government revenue offices and procedures.

Other similar implications of this move are the maintenance of staff houses by Department of Architectural services (Buildings). This Department is not up to its task. The best thing that could be done to Departments like Building Services and CTO is to privatize them. Perhaps the most amazing aspect of the government take over is that it runs counter to some government pronouncements like involvement of the private sector, decentralization, economic empowerment. This move removes services like banking from the private sector. While private sector banking services does not come free (understatement) it is better than the government revenue offices. I fail to understand how one can reconcile the fact that schools earned significant interest from the grants from government. This is free money which is being taken away from schools. The interest allowed schools to purchase vehicles, which we see on our roads. The total income from interest could run into millions of Pula.

With the take over of CJSS, the Boards of Governors of the schools falls away. This move will have the impact of minimizing the role of Communities in Community Junior Schools. This is a most regrettable consequence of the take over. The involvement of communities in the running of schools was a very noble and progressive step in line with world trends that puts more powers and responsibilities in local hands. The Director of Secondary Education might argue that many of the members of the Boards did not understand their roles except to receive a seating allowance. The same could be said of many other institutions of democracy, boards of parastatals, council, parliament etc. In any case this issue of the quality of membership of the boards was improving in leaps and bounds, even in small settlements, as many professionals retired into the boards as time

fillers. In any case the Minister of Education had completely taken over the role of appointing members of the Boards so he was responsible for their performance or lack of. The way to go would have been to develop the Boards so that the members could better appreciate their roles and then increase their responsibilities over time to even include things like employment of teachers. It must be said that there were exemplary boards which had managed to add value to the schools. Are the boards abolished to save money in the seating allowances? If that is the case the country is sacrificing an important principle to save a few thebes.

The current Minister of Education will be remembered more for his role in reversing some of the gains of civil society.

I want to maintain that the take over of CJSS is misguided in that it will not improve the quality of education, it will not be cheaper, will not bring efficiency to the schools. What it will do is to demotivate teachers and students. The main beneficiaries will be the non-teaching staff, but at what cost to efficiency? It begs the question which is next in the take over? University of Botswana!

By Baboloki Tlale President BOFESETE