THE SCHOOL TRANSPORT CHALLENGE:

A disproportionate effect on poor learners

Millions of public school learners walk to school or depend on risky modes of public transport. The direct and indirect costs of these modes of commuting to school disproportionately affect learners from poor families. *Dr Peter Jacobs* and his research team argue that a learner transport programme funded from the public purse and targeted at qualifying learners in poor and low-income families, is critical to realise the right to basic education.

"IN 2016, ABOUT 74% OF 13 MILLION PUBLIC SCHOOL LEARNERS WALKED TO AND FROM SCHOOL."

Almost three quarters of public school learners in South Africa walk to school.

Concerns around access, safety, reliability and affordability of learner transportation loom large and continue to make headline news in South Africa. In KwaZulu-Natal, an education rights advocacy group, Equal Education, supported 12 schools in a court case against the provincial departments of education and transport for the provision of safe and reliable transport for learners. The KwaZulu-Natal High Court ordered the two departments to provide transport to qualifying learners at these schools by 1 April 2018. Urging a more proactive approach, the court also instructed government to ensure proper planning and budgeting for learner transport provision. It questioned the conception and design of learner transport policy and called for rethinking how this policy is to be implemented nationally.

Costs of transport

There has been a considerable shift in transport modes to public schools.

In 2016, about 74% of 13 million public school learners reportedly walked to and from school compared to slightly more than 78% of 11,9 million public school learners in 2009. Between 2009 and 2016, the share of learners using taxis and buses

that serve the broader commuting public has hovered around 8% while the use of privately owned vehicles has increased by more than 300% over this period. Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal and the Western Cape, regions of high-wealth concentration, consistently account for about 70% of learners that use private transportation to and from schools. These learners are most likely from families who own their own vehicles or can afford private transport, but this mode of transport is not accessible to learners from poorer households.

Public transport use declined

Over the period 2009-2016, self-reported use of public transport modes declined from 1,2 million learners to slightly more than one million learners and has been completely overtaken by the use of private transportation. Interestingly, the cost incidence of learners using general commuter transport follows a similar logic as in the case of those using privately owned vehicles. When public school learners use taxis, buses and trains with the rest of the commuting public as their main mode of travel, then the individual family must bear the cost. In some instances, this can be an 'informal lift club' where a commuter minibus taxi also transports learners on the basis of an agreement with a group of parents willing and able to pay the fare per trip. Invariably, this arrangement, typically done informally, is in effect an unregulated learner transport operation often involved in wide-ranging irregularities, malpractices and road accidents.

Rethinking transport provision

The provision of government-subsidised learner transport started well before May 2015 when cabinet adopted the National Learner Transport policy. Even though this policy took several years to construct, finalise and approve, it is a landmark achievement as it introduced norms and standards that form the minimum benchmark for all provinces and school districts. The 2015 policy includes guidelines on intergovernmental relations between the departments of transport and education at national and provincial spheres, norms and standards for fiscal allocation to learner transport, vehicles and operators, and qualifying criteria for leaners to access the transport benefit. This desktop review of provincial evidence found substantial differences in how each province has been implementing the policy.

Who should be responsible?

At national level, the departments of Education and Transport are jointly tasked with policy implementation through a dedicated National Inter-Departmental Committee. Annual budget statements of National Treasury indicate that funding for learner transport is allocated through the Department of Transport (DOT). Provincially, however, the tasks to plan for, coordinate and oversee learner transport differ. In five provinces, the DOT leads implementation whereas in the rest, this role sits with their counterparts in the Department of Basic Education (DBE). It is against this backdrop that this study explored options for greater effectiveness and efficiency in intergovernmental relations across facets of this programme. If the focus is on the functionality and regulation of vehicles and quality of road infrastructure, then the DOT seems the natural and logical lead. Alternatively, if the overriding concern is the best educational outcomes of learners, then the DBE might be the fitting institutional anchor for this intervention. Each option requires a stipulation of roles and tasks that supporting departments are expected to fulfil in view of the multifaceted nature of providing learner transport.

What is actual spending?

In their annual reports, provinces report highly aggregated expenditures on learner transport as well as highly aggregated numbers of learner beneficiaries. Yearly trends based on these aggregates do not shed light on the extent of and reasons for intra-provincial or district variations. Furthermore, administrative reports use figures on anticipated need (demand) to derive planned spending or budgets per year but the determinants and underlying rule-of-thumb for this procedure are not explained. It is therefore not possible to tell why and how expectations differ from observed and actual spending and headcounts of beneficiary learners.

We need better data

Only five provinces responded to requests for data on annual learner transport expenditure coupled with the number of learners transported for the period 2009-2016. Among these provinces, only Limpopo and the Western Cape supplied a complete data set. According to the assembled statistics, provinces appear to be spending more money to transport learners to and from school. However, when this information is standardised as spending per learner (without factoring in inflation), then the inter-provincial differences and fluctuations become harder to explain. A systemic driver, transportation inflation, might account for these discrepancies. We need an in-depth and focussed investigation of learner transport per school district to close this information gap and to inform urgent and results-driven policy action.

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