

## SCHOOLS - AN ESSENTIAL LINK IN THE CHAIN OF SERVICES AND SUPPORT FOR CHILDREN

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*“... it is not the same as it was 2 years ago – most of the time when I am in class, teachers will be teaching but I find myself being absent minded ... I think about the biggest problems we have. We can't find food and I have my siblings to worry about - I worry about how we are going to get food...”*

16 year old Goodness

Schools represent an important link in the chain of services and support for children in South Africa. In their earlier draft of the Children's Bill, the SALRC included a section (S236) outlining a role for schools in identifying and referring potentially vulnerable children. This section has been deleted from the bill, leaving no reference to the role of schools in facilitating service access and delivery to children.

Schools have several comparative advantages over other services when it comes to reaching potentially vulnerable children. In particular:

- The education system has an existing infrastructure of over 28 000 schools around the country.
- Approximately 11 500 000 children attend school in South Africa.
- Children spend several hours a day at school, over a period of many years. Teachers are therefore ideally placed to monitor children's behaviour, and to recognise when a child may be experiencing difficulties.
- The school environment is designed to be an inclusive environment focused on children and child development.
- Schools are central and relatively accessible when compared to other services such as health or social services. Many of the problems that children face in accessing social workers could be overcome if they were able to access support through their schools.
- Unlike health and social services, children do not go to school only when they are experiencing problems. The school environment is therefore not a problem-focused one, making it conducive to addressing vulnerabilities (such as those related to HIV/AIDS) in a non-stigmatising manner.
- By providing support to children in and through schools, fewer children will be forced to drop out of school and some who have dropped out may be encouraged to return.
- If schools were playing a more active role in identifying and referring vulnerable learners, more of these learners would be able to access support services and, as a result, many would be in a better position to concentrate in class – making learning easier and strengthening the core business of schools.

- And finally, the education policy framework recognises the need for schools to be playing a role in the identification, care and support of vulnerable learners.

Strengthening the role of schools in the identification and support of vulnerable children will substantially reduce the likelihood of children falling through the gaps in the service 'net'.

*"It is easy to get to the social workers because at school they gave us the number of the social workers so that if there is anything that we need from them, we can phone them"*

Zanele, 14 years old

### **Suggested redrafts in the Children's Bill**

The Children's Bill needs to recognise and make explicit provision for the important role that schools play in strengthening service access and delivery to vulnerable children. We suggest therefore that the following clause (or an equivalent version) be included in the bill:

The principal of a public or private school must on a confidential basis -

(a) Identify children who are frequently absent from school and/or who exhibit other signs of vulnerability; and

(i) Take reasonable steps to assist them in returning to school or to discourage them from leaving school;

(ii) Take reasonable steps to refer these children to appropriate support services;

(iii) Where appropriate, as prescribed, submit the names and addresses of these children to the provincial head of social development.

### **For further information, please contact:**

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