

Survival of the Fittest



Support for parents through the process of school application

This is a time of year when parents may find themselves faced with school rejection letters or simply silence. The accompanying anxiety and stress of uncertainty about their child's future education becomes unbearable. It is difficult to avoid the feeling that when it comes to making school application, it seems to be a case of "survival of the fittest" – a competition. Some children will be successful and others will not. And when your own child is turned down, you may feel hurt and devastated.

The decision hangs on the learner's level of development or academic progress.

Often there is quite a degree of thought that goes into making application to one or more schools of your choice. To have that option taken away from you because your child has not been found "suitable", is difficult to process. The sheer volume of applicants is often the over-riding reason given for exclusion, but at times there is a sense that the decision hangs on the learner's level of development or academic progress. This is often felt even more deeply when we know that a child is struggling with some kind of learning barrier and may be in need of additional support. Feelings of rejection surface and may be difficult for the whole family to deal with.

How then do we move forward when we find that it nearing the end of the school year and there is no confirmed place in school?

Practical steps to take

General

Bear in mind that not all places will be accepted by those offered first time round and that you may receive an offer once the initial admissions have been finalised.

- Contact each school to find out about this process if it hasn't been explained clearly in a letter.
- You are also free to write your own letter of motivation to support the second round. Usually this happens during August, so you would expect to be informed during September if space has become available.
- Parents who have been fortunate enough to receive multiple offers are urged to remember to inform the schools which they choose to decline. In this way parents who are on a waiting list can be informed timeously that there is still place for them!

Grade R

Although increasingly government schools have Grade R classes incorporated into their primary section, there are insufficient spaces for all.

- Try not to despair if placement in the Grade R at one of your schools of choice is unavailable.
- Independent pre-schools with Grade R classes follow the same curriculum and are required to be registered with the Department of Education, so can also prepare your child adequately for Grade 1.
- Prepare to make your Grade 1 applications as timeously as possible in next year to secure a place

for 2019 (W Cape applications open in February).

- Remember, the Department advises parents to apply at three schools in order to optimise possibility of placement.

Grade 1

They are also required to give equal opportunity to children in need of support

- You should be **informed in writing** if and why your child has not been accepted, and should ask for this if the school has not done so. You have a right to appeal if you feel the reason given is unfair or discriminatory.
- Government schools are **not allowed** to subject children to any **admission test** or base admission on **ability to pay fees or a registration fee**. They are also required to give equal opportunity to children in need of support and show due consideration of meeting their support needs.
- You are advised to obtain **written notice of refusal** from three schools. Take these notices to the Education District office serving your area. You will have to complete a form indicating that your child still needs placement. Once again, any special motivation can be added.
- In terms of geographic location, the WCED does not apply any catchment requirements, and parents may choose to apply to schools close to their place of work, rather than home.
- School Governing Bodies may however determine their own catchment areas.

Grade 8

In terms of process, much the same applies as to Grade 1.

- High schools may generate more of a sense of **competition**, with academic and sport performance seemingly given priority of placement. One colleague described how

articles about top-performing prior students was placed at the top of the information pack they were given.

- Parents negotiating this milestone report that the **lack of information** creates extra stress alongside the concern that their child is also anxious and aware that they may not be "making the mark".
- Schools seem to take hugely different approaches to how they inform parents and the experience can be unsettling and confusing.



Schools of Skills

These schools have their own unique application process that is handled by the child's primary school and Education District office during the year the child turns 14 years.

- The 4-year skills-based curriculum is an excellent option for many learners who are more **practically or socially talented** and have struggled to keep pace with the academic curriculum.

- Applications also invariably far exceed the number of places and are allocated during September.
- **Do not remove your child from primary school** with the intention of getting a placement when your child turns fourteen. The child loses out on very important academic and social

It is illegal to take your child out of school before he/she turns 16.

development, which impedes your child's chances of accessing these schools. It is also illegal to take your child out of school before he/she turns 16.

- Unsuccessful application can be extremely worrying to parents and teachers alike. It means continuation within the mainstream schools. Your child would need **support based on inclusive education policies** and guidelines to cope and succeed in the higher grades, at least until Grade 9.

Special schools

Health professionals may have advised parents that their young children have specific and high-level support needs. They may have recommended that these children attend special schools.

- Special school placements are managed centrally at the provincial education departments.
- Children already in a school, where special school placement has been recommended, will be handled by the school and Education District initially, but will be referred to the provincial education department for special school placement.

- Unfortunately, parents are often left believing that placement is guaranteed, only to discover late in the year that this is not the case.
- Special school waiting lists are long and communication to parents is minimal or at times non-existent. Parents may feel their stress levels are registering on the Richter scale!
- Parents should keep a record of all applications (and rejections), and approach the MEC for Education about securing a place in school for their child. It is the MEC's responsibility to provide a place in school for all children according to the Schools Act.
- As implementation of the inclusive education policy, with its commitment to deliver increased support for children at their ordinary local school, improves, application to mainstream schools is a real option for their child. This can be an essential alternative to their child remaining at home.
- Some ordinary schools are now referred to as full service or inclusive schools, receiving extra support from their District Team. These are a good starting point for parents seeking an alternative.

Wherever you are on this nerve-racking journey of school-going, remember that children learn and grow best when they feel fully accepted for who they are, not where they go to school, and that any stumbling blocks are not because of them.

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