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Site:
vernondickason.com

Email:
connect@vernondickason.com

Address:
Cape Town, South Africa

What if every school had its own constitution?

From Compliance to Covenant: Reimagining School Governance Through Shared Values

Author: Vernon Dickason

Opening Reflection

Rules govern behaviour. Constitutions shape identity. In South Africa, schools are guided by policies, codes of conduct and departmental directives, but what if each school had its own constitution? Not just a rulebook, but a living document co-authored by learners, educators, parents and leaders. A covenant of values, rights and responsibilities. By 2030, could this become the norm, a way to anchor governance in shared purpose, not just procedural compliance?

The Scenario

By 2030, the Department of Basic Education launches the School Constitution Framework (SCF), inviting every public school to draft and adopt its own constitution. These documents include:

- A preamble articulating the school's ethos, history and vision
- Core values agreed upon by the school community (e.g. dignity, equity, curiosity, care)
- Rights and responsibilities of learners, educators, parents and governing bodies
- Protocols for decision-making, conflict resolution and accountability
- Symbolic commitments, such as environmental stewardship or cultural inclusion

Constitutions are reviewed every five years through participatory forums. They are aligned with national law, but allow for local nuance. Pilot schools report stronger cohesion, clearer expectations and reduced disciplinary incidents. However, some struggle with facilitation, legal literacy and inclusive representation.

What It Reveals

This scenario reveals the power of narrative governance. A constitution is not just a legal tool, it is a story of who we are and how we choose to live together. It also exposes the limitations of top-down policy when it lacks relational anchoring.

From a systems-thinking lens, constitutions offer a way to localise governance without losing coherence. They invite schools to become communities of practice, not just sites of instruction.

Why It Matters

South African schools are diverse, complex and often strained. A constitution offers clarity, unity and shared ownership. It affirms that governance is not just about control, it is about covenant. It transforms rules into relationships.

Philosophically, this scenario touches on social contract theory, Ubuntu governance, and transformative justice. It asks us to lead not by decree, but by dialogue.

Reflective Responses

What does a school constitution look like in practice?

It looks like a learner knowing their rights, a teacher knowing their responsibilities, and a parent knowing their role. It means decisions made with reference to shared values, not just departmental mandates.

How do we ensure constitutions are inclusive and meaningful?

By facilitating co-creation, offering legal scaffolding, and embedding review processes. By treating the constitution as a living document, not a static formality.

What risks emerge if constitutions are imposed or ignored?

Tokenism, confusion and erosion of trust. Without authentic participation, constitutions become paper shields, not moral compasses.

Sidebar: Facts and Philosophy

Insights from South African Governance and Policy (2025):

- The South African Schools Act (1996) mandates SGBs and codes of conduct, but does not require constitutions
- The Schooling 2030 Action Plan calls for stronger school identity and community engagement
- SADTU's 2030 Vision advocates for foundational learning, social justice and inclusive governance

"A constitution is not a machine, it is a mirror. It reflects our deepest hopes, our shared commitments, and our refusal to be ruled by fear." - *Justice Albie Sachs*