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School Governing Bodies Under Pressure Power, Partnership and the SGB: Who Governs the School?

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Opening Reflection

School Governing Bodies were born out of a democratic impulse, to give communities a voice in shaping the institutions that shape their children. But today, that promise is under strain. Across South Africa, SGBs face mounting pressure: legal reforms, governance confusion, and growing expectations without adequate support. The question is no longer whether SGBs matter, it is whether they are being empowered or eroded. And whether we still believe that the people closest to the school should help lead it.

What Happened

On 24 June 2025, Minister Siviwe Gwarube briefed Parliament's Portfolio Committee on the state of SGB functionality nationwide. The presentation followed oversight visits and a national survey revealing widespread challenges:

- Role confusion between SGBs and school management
- Training gaps, especially in rural and under-resourced schools
- Weak enforcement of financial, disciplinary and admissions policies
- Conflict of interest and governance breakdowns in several provinces

The Committee expressed concern over the lack of concrete data and called for a detailed, measurable report to guide oversight. Stakeholder organisations, including FEDSAS, GBF and NASGB, acknowledged the dysfunction and called for urgent capacity-building and clearer policy alignment.

What It Reveals

This moment reveals a deep tension between decentralised governance and systemic accountability. SGBs are meant to embody democratic participation, but without training, clarity and support, they risk becoming symbolic rather than functional. It also exposes the fragility of school governance when roles blur and responsibilities are not scaffolded.

From a systems-thinking lens, SGBs are nodes of relational power. Their effectiveness depends not just on policy, but on trust, clarity and capacity.

Why It Matters

SGBs are not optional, they are constitutional structures designed to uphold transparency, inclusion and local agency. When they falter, learners suffer. When they thrive, schools become communities of care and accountability.

Philosophically, this touches on subsidiarity, relational governance and Ubuntu ethics. Governance must be shared, not imposed. And leadership must be cultivated, not assumed.

Reflective Responses

What does a functional SGB look like?

It looks like parents, educators and community members working together with clarity, purpose and shared responsibility. It means decisions made with, not for, the school.

How do we support SGBs under pressure?

By offering tiered training, mentorship, and legal guidance. By clarifying roles and creating feedback loops between departments and communities.

What risks emerge when SGBs are sidelined or underprepared?

Mismanagement, mistrust and missed opportunities. Without strong SGBs, schools lose their democratic anchor.

Sidebar: Facts and Philosophy

Insights from DBE and Parliamentary Briefings (2025):

- South Africa has over 22,000 public schools, each with an SGB
- The 2024 amendments to SASA introduced stricter conflict-of-interest provisions and enhanced HoD oversight
- Many SGBs in rural areas operate without formal training or access to legal support

“SGBs remain the most important pillars of democratic school governance in South Africa... but we must strengthen their functionality to ensure they serve the best interests of learners.” - *Minister Siviwe Gwarube*