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Governance and SGBs Power to the People, or the Province?

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Opening Reflection

Schools are not just buildings, they are communities. And at the heart of those communities are School Governing Bodies (SGBs), made up of parents, educators and local stakeholders who help shape the culture, policies and priorities of their schools. The BELA Bill proposes a shift in governance, placing more authority in the hands of provincial departments. This invites a deeper question: Are we decentralising for efficiency, or centralising at the cost of community voice?

What the BELA Bill Says

- SGBs must submit language and admission policies to the Head of Department (HoD) for approval.
- The HoD may amend or override these policies to promote equity and access.
- The Bill introduces procedures for arbitration and mediation between SGBs and education departments.
- The Minister may appoint advisors on curriculum and assessment matters, bypassing SGB input.

What's Changed: From SASA to BELA

Under SASA (1996):

SGBs had significant autonomy over school policies, including language, admissions, and codes of conduct. They were seen as democratic vehicles for community participation.

Under BELA (2024):

SGB decisions are now subject to departmental approval. The Bill formalises conflict resolution mechanisms but reduces local authority over key decisions.

Key Shift:

From community-led governance to departmental oversight, with structured mediation but diminished autonomy.

Why It Matters

This clause aims to address inconsistencies and exclusionary practices in school governance. In some cases, SGBs have been accused of gatekeeping or reinforcing privilege. However, removing their authority risks alienating the very communities schools are meant to serve.

From a systems-thinking perspective, governance must balance efficiency, equity and agency. SGBs are not perfect, but they are essential. They embody the principle that education is a shared responsibility, not just a bureaucratic function.

Philosophically, this touches on democratic participation, subsidiarity, and relational accountability. Ubuntu reminds us that decisions made with, not for, communities carry deeper legitimacy.

Reflective Responses

What does meaningful school governance look like?

It looks like shared decision-making, transparent processes and a commitment to both excellence and inclusion. It means listening to those closest to the learners.

How do we prevent governance from becoming gatekeeping?

By ensuring SGBs are diverse, trained and accountable. By creating checks and balances without erasing local voice.

What risks emerge when authority is centralised?

Loss of responsiveness, erosion of trust, and a disconnect between policy and lived reality. Governance must remain rooted in relationship.

Sidebar: Facts and Philosophy

Statistics from Equal Education (2023):

- Only 54% of SGBs in rural schools receive formal governance training.
- 68% of parents surveyed felt excluded from key school decisions.
- Litigation between SGBs and departments has cost the state over R30 million in the past five years.

“We must build governance systems that are both fair and participatory. Centralisation without consultation is not transformation, it is displacement.” - Mary Metcalfe, Education Policy Expert