



PROFILE

ALICE COETZEE speaks to the person charged with ringing the

changes in unjust education in the PWV region and finds that calm,

collected Mary Metcalfe is an open book.

Schooled for success?



Metcalfe

DIEPKLOOF principals have been locked out by the community, white parents are fuming about education plans for the future, university students are marching over fees ... and the PWV region's unflappable Mary Metcalfe admits with engaging honesty, "This is a terrible job! Who would want it?"

Observing the vigour with which Metcalfe, Member of the Executive Committee (MEC) for Education, is confronting the injustices of apartheid schooling, one is surprised that

initially she saw more of a back-room role for herself. "When the party election lists were being drawn up I kept on saying: 'Put me in the bureaucracy. I'll be happy there.' But the ANC leadership was emphatic that I should take a political position because there was no guarantee of ANC posts in the civil service."

Metcalfe is one of two women in ministerial positions in the PWV government. Interestingly, both she and Jessie Duarte, MEC for Safety and Security, occupy the two hottest seats. Both are seasoned activists who are now being watched, not only for how they will deliver politically, but because they are women.

Sipping coffee from a polystyrene cup while her visitor uses the office china, she talks of not allowing the gap between her and those she serves to widen. She is also aware that in the face of a tidal wave of expectation, she has the "frightening" task of helping to reverse a systemic problem that has developed over 40 years.

She likens the restructuring of education to the task of building a new house over the shell of an old one that is in a state of collapse: as the old house caves in there is a danger that the new will be dragged down with it. In practical terms this means that the flashpoints of daily experience – lack of books, apartheid curricula, authoritarian attitudes – ignite the educational undergrowth, drawing the fledgling PWV education department into mediating sit-ins, defusing angry marches and diverting chalk-downs. Unlike its predecessor, the response is one of understanding and empathy for the anger.

"But the solutions cannot be ad hoc," says Metcalfe, "we are in danger of being sucked into crisis management. There has to be a balance."

All this is putting strain on a department which, on paper, does not exist. Take the lift to the seventh floor of 30 Simmonds Street in Johannesburg and you walk into a room full of people, telephones ringing, computers clicking.

"Technically, there are only three of us in the department," says Metcalfe. The other members of her strategic management team have been begged, borrowed or stolen from educational non-governmental organisations. Members of the transitional task team are drawn from this group – and they face a January 1 deadline for the integration of the education system. Creating a single education department will be relatively easy; a single system will be quite another thing. Just one

aspect – the setting up of standard regulations across the board, from Department of Education and Training (DET) schools in the townships to state-assisted Model C schools and private schools – will be a political obstacle course.

The defiance of school regulations was a major thrust in the resistance strategy of the South African Democratic Teachers' Union. Reversing this when so little on the ground has changed will require sensitivity in consulting with teachers' organisations about new ground rules.

Among those to have come up against the Metcalfe determination are white parents who are outraged by her insistence that from next year pupil numbers in mainly white schools will increase to at least 30 for every classroom. Metcalfe understands their anger but believes she is absolutely correct. By the same token she believes there are many schools which are committed to using their facilities for the benefit of those who were previously excluded.

In Diepkloof, Soweto, principals were locked out by the community after allegations of corruption. Metcalfe is adamant that principals must return to schools and that due process must be followed.

The conflict between old and new styles of administration influences every aspect of Metcalfe's work. Senior bureaucrats continue to pursue their policies; communities continue to refuse to work with the DET; the Public Service Commission continues to use the same criteria that sidelined the majority of people for decades. The result is frustration, adversarial relationships and a feeling of powerlessness.

The schoolyard is where Metcalfe feels at home. A trained teacher who was born in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, her educational experience spans the full spectrum, from remedial through to teacher training, with lecturing posts at Johannesburg College of Education and Wits University. From 1986 her work took a community-oriented direction with her involvement in the Black Sash, the All Schools for All People campaign, educational support to the Free the Children Campaign and Detainees Support and then into the National Education Crisis Committee, Southern Transvaal, and the ANC education committee.

Never part of Johannesburg's white left clique, Metcalfe's rise within ANC ranks to the regional executive committee of the ANC PWV surprised some into asking, "How did you get in?"

She laughs, "I was always clear about the issues and the projects that had to be done. I never had time for the social scene. I was too busy." So busy that she became legendary for her working days which started at 4am. The job at hand was the ANC educational policy document and she would usually work for four hours until 8am so that her family would not miss her.

With the future of so many children in her hands, it is no wonder that MEC for Education was not a responsibility Mary Metcalfe chose lightly. ■

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