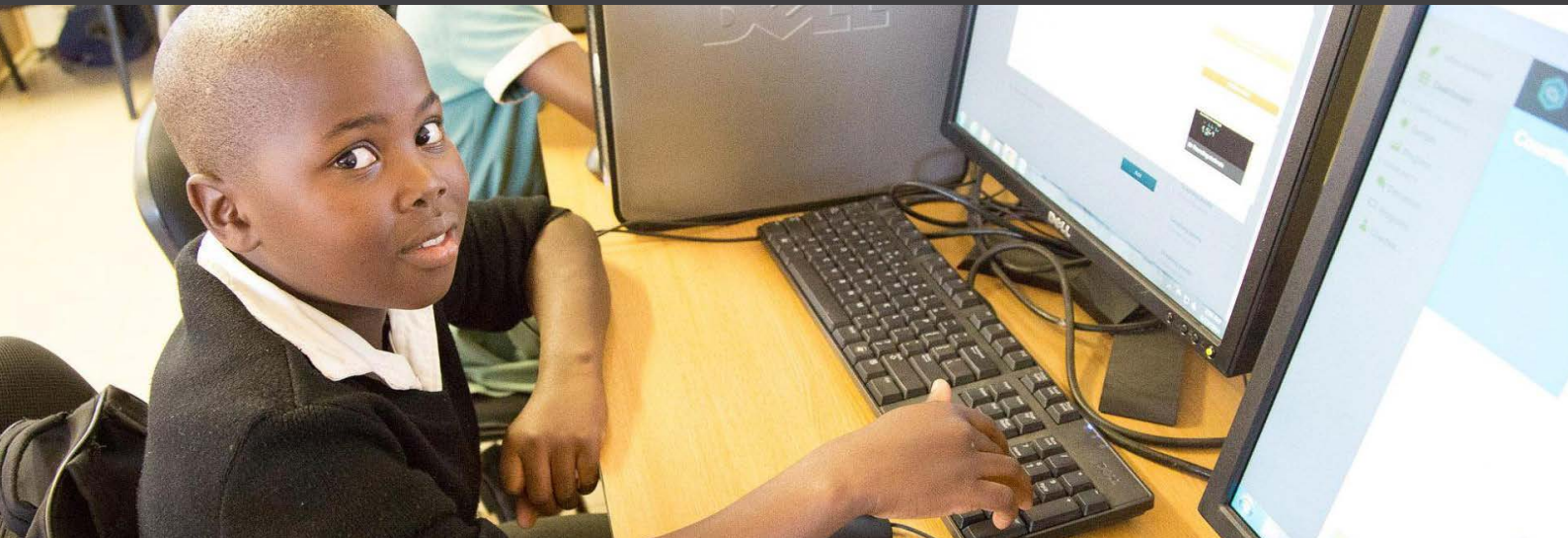


## A BALANCING ACT

# Assessing the quality and financial viability of low-fee independent schools



*Low-fee independent schools (LFIS) are a growing phenomenon in South Africa. In many parts of the country, they offer an alternative choice of education to poor communities, they address the lack of public schools, offer access to better quality learning, and fulfil parents' desire for schools with a religious affiliation or alternative philosophies not provided for by public schools. In South Africa, as elsewhere, there is growing interest from investors and donors to support these schools or invest in them.*

*One of the key findings identified in CDE's 2015 report, **Investing in Potential: The financial viability of low-fee private schools in South Africa**, is that all LFIS are engaged in an endless balancing act between keeping fees low to allow access to the poor, and providing quality teaching and learning for high learner achievement. Financial viability and quality of instruction are intricately inter-connected. Schools that provide quality education are more likely to attract a growing number of learners, achieve economies of scale and have a better chance of becoming financially sustainable. If schools raise their fees too high, they will exclude large numbers of poor learners, but if the fees are too low, they may not be able to achieve the quality that parents and government require.*

*In exploring the relationship between quality, fee-level and financial viability in LFIS, CDE undertook a comparative study of pertinent international and local quality assurance processes and instruments. This included five international school assessment frameworks, 10 national frameworks for state schools, 13 private international school instruments and nine South African public and independent school instruments. This report provides an overview of the key issues involved in assessing the quality and viability of LFIS in South Africa and other developing countries.*

The Centre for Development and Enterprise, South Africa's leading development think tank, focuses on vital national development issues and their relationship to economic growth and democratic consolidation. Through examining South African realities and international experience, CDE formulates practical policy proposals for addressing major social and economic challenges. It has a special interest in the role of business and markets in development.

Series editor: Ann Bernstein

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# Acronyms

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<b>APS</b>	Affordable Private Schools
<b>CDE</b>	Centre for Development and Enterprise
<b>CER</b>	Cornerstone Economic Research
<b>CfBT</b>	Centre for British Teachers
<b>CHE</b>	Council on Higher Education
<b>DepEd</b>	Department of Education (Philippines)
<b>DFID</b>	Department for International Development
<b>ESC</b>	Education Service Contracting Programme
<b>FAPE</b>	Fund for Assistance to Private Education
<b>FAS</b>	Foundation Assisted Schools Program
<b>GMC</b>	Gray Matters Capital
<b>GMR</b>	Global Monitoring Report
<b>HEQC</b>	Higher Education Quality Committee
<b>INR</b>	Indian Rupee
<b>ISSA</b>	International Step by Step Association
<b>LCPS</b>	Low-Cost Private Schools
<b>LFIS</b>	Low-Fee Independent Schools
<b>NPO</b>	Non-Profit Organisation
<b>PAEPL</b>	Provincial Average Estimate of Expenditure Per Learner
<b>PBO</b>	Public Benefit Organisation
<b>PEAC</b>	Private Education Assistance Committee
<b>PEDs</b>	Provincial Education Departments
<b>PEF</b>	Punjab Education Foundation
<b>QAA</b>	Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education
<b>SAESC</b>	South African Extraordinary Schools Coalition
<b>SRC</b>	School Report Card
<b>UK</b>	United Kingdom

# Introduction

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Low-fee independent schools (LFIS) are a growing phenomenon in developing countries, as they are in South Africa.<sup>1</sup> In many parts of the country, they offer an alternative choice of education to poor communities, they address the lack of public schools, offer access to better quality learning, and fulfil parents' desire for schools with a religious affiliation or alternative philosophies not provided for by public schools.

In South Africa, as elsewhere, investors and donors are increasingly keen on supporting or investing in these schools. However, one of the key findings identified in CDE's 2015 report, *Investing in Potential: The financial viability of low-fee private schools in South Africa*, is that all low-fee schools are engaged in an endless balancing act between keeping fees low to allow access to the poor, and providing quality teaching and learning for high learner achievement. Financial viability and quality of instruction are intricately interconnected. Schools that provide quality education are more likely to attract a growing number of learners, achieve economies of scale and have a better chance of becoming financially sustainable. However, if schools raise their fees too high, they will exclude large numbers of poor learners. On the other hand, if the fees are too low, they may not be able to achieve the quality that parents and government require.

In order to explore the relationship between quality, fee-level and financial viability in LFIS, CDE undertook a comparative study of pertinent international and local quality assurance processes and instruments. This included five international school assessment frameworks, 10 national frameworks for state schools, 13 private international school instruments and nine South African public and independent school instruments. These are listed in appendix A. This report provides an overview of the key issues involved in assessing the quality and viability of LFIS in South Africa and other developing countries.

Emanating from the research, CDE was able to identify six components of schooling that a donor, funder or philanthropist could use as indicators of quality teaching and learning, and financial viability, should they wish to invest in the school. These are: school governance and financial management; school leadership; the physical learning environment (infrastructure); health, safety and security; teaching, learning and attainments; and community and stakeholder involvement. These six components were used to develop a rapid evaluation instrument, with measurable indicators for each component. The school evaluation instrument was designed to elicit enough information and insight into a school in order to make a judgement on whether it has the essential systems in place to ensure its financial survival while delivering quality teaching and learning. To help contain the costs of the evaluation this instrument is designed in such a way as to maximise the amount of relevant data collected, while at the same time minimising the time spent at the school by the external evaluator. The assessment instrument has been kept simple and easy to administer, so that evaluators with limited experience in school evaluation can use it. That instrument, together with a user's manual, is available from CDE on request.

# What is Quality Education?

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Defining 'quality' in relation to education is notoriously difficult with different definitions both in the literature and in common use.<sup>2</sup> These definitions are not usually mutually exclusive but place emphasis on different criteria, with some groups stressing the unquantifiable outcomes of education (for example, political participation, social and democratic values and egalitarianism), while others emphasise the measurable cognitive skills acquired at school, especially numeracy and literacy.<sup>3</sup>

Nonetheless, there is considerable consensus around the basic dimensions of quality education that include:

1. Learners who are healthy, well-nourished, ready to participate and learn and supported in learning by their families and communities;
2. Environments that are healthy, safe, protective, gender-sensitive and provide adequate resources and facilities;
3. Content that is reflected in relevant curricula and materials for the acquisition of basic skills, especially in the areas of literacy, numeracy and life skills, as well as knowledge in areas such as gender, health, nutrition, HIV/AIDS prevention and peace;
4. Processes through which trained teachers use learner-centred teaching approaches in well-managed classrooms and schools, plus skilful assessment to facilitate learning;
5. Outcomes that encompass knowledge, skills, values and attitudes, and are linked to national goals for education and positive participation in society.<sup>4</sup>

Until recently, much discussion of educational quality centred on system inputs, such as infrastructure, learner-teacher ratios, and curricular content. In recent years, however, more attention has been paid to educational processes and outputs — how school leaders and teachers use inputs to frame meaningful learning experiences for learners and produce the desired outputs.<sup>5</sup>

At the most basic organisational level, schooling has four aspects:

- *inputs* of technical, human and social capital
- *processes* involving both classroom-level interactions among teacher, learners and the curriculum and the organising processes of the school
- *outputs* that relate to student learning and to the technical efficiency of the school (the effectiveness with which a given set of inputs is used to produce an output)
- *outcomes* at the organisational level, such as increased student access to education, more time devoted to teaching in classrooms and greater allocation of education expenditure for teaching and learning.<sup>6</sup>

# Quality Assurance in Education: International Experience

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Quality assurance is a generic term open to differing interpretations. However, assessing whether an institution meets particular required standards is a key part of quality assurance.

The South African Council on Higher Education (CHE) Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) defines quality assurance as 'processes of ensuring that institutional arrangements for meeting specified quality standards or requirements of education provision are effective.'<sup>7</sup> The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) in the United Kingdom (UK) also links quality assurance with achievement of standards: 'quality assurance is the means through which an institution ensures and confirms that the conditions are in place for learners to achieve the standards set by it or by another awarding body.'<sup>8</sup> In essence then, quality assurance provides users of an educational institution with a guarantee that the school meets the standards that the user expects.

Hämäläinen and Jakku-Sihvonen (2000) maintain that quality assurance always includes two purposes: accountability and improvement.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Vlăsceanu *et al* define quality assurance as:

*...an all-embracing term referring to an ongoing, continuous process of evaluating (assessing, monitoring, guaranteeing, maintaining, and improving) the quality of an education system, institutions, or programmes. As a regulatory mechanism, quality assurance focuses on both accountability and improvement, providing information and judgments (not ranking) through an agreed upon and consistent process and well-established criteria.<sup>10</sup>*

At the institutional level, there are three broad areas for assessing quality: *service delivery, efficiency and learning outcomes*:

- **Service delivery:** Educational service delivery refers to school-level processes of organising work that have an effect on learning outcomes. It includes the 'technical core' of schooling, including the primary processes that provide the conditions for learning in the classroom and the wider organisational structure and environment that provides the direct and indirect conditions for classroom practice. Commonly, three sets of indicators: inputs and infrastructure at the school level; the effort and academic and subject knowledge of the teachers; and the availability of resources are considered when assessing service delivery. These indicators serve as important conditions and/or causal processes that themselves trigger the other two outcomes: institutional efficiency; and learning outcomes.
- **Institutional efficiency:** Efficiency is 'the desired level of output for the lowest cost' where 'output' is characterised as the ability of a school to deliver educational services that provide the best possible learning outcomes at the lowest possible cost. This technical definition of efficiency, however, does not take into consideration 'societal efficiency', the long-term effects of schools on the future prospects of learners. While LFIS have to focus their resources and efforts on achieving the best possible outcomes for poor children, it is also important for them to consider societal efficiency and the extent to which they are addressing other societal disadvantage such as gender disparities, geographic isolation, disabilities as well as ethnic, religious and linguistic disadvantages.



- **Learning outcomes:** Learning outcomes are statements of the knowledge, skills and attitudes that individual learners should possess and can demonstrate upon completion of a learning experience or sequence of learning experiences. Clarifying what is meant by student learning outcomes depends on the purpose, coupled with identification of appropriate indicators. Commonly, the more quantitative learning outcomes are assessed in terms of children's enrolments, attendance, retention, year repetition and completion rates.

## Quality Assurance for Accountability

Accountability is defined as the acceptance of responsibility and being answerable for one's actions. In the school management context, accountability may take on additional meanings such as compliance with the rules and regulations of school governance, reporting to those with oversight authority over the school and linking rewards and sanctions to expected results.<sup>11</sup> Thus teachers and schools – who are trusted with the task of teaching and instructing children – should be held accountable for learners' outcomes, and holding teachers and schools responsible for results intends to improve performance and identify underperforming schools for remediation.<sup>12</sup>

It is important to note that student test results can be used for improvement purposes without teachers and schools being held accountable for these results. For example, a teacher can use test results to identify student weaknesses and strengths in order to improve classroom instruction. Accountability is thus concerned with responsibility and then acknowledging the responsibility in some public form by demonstrating success or acknowledging failure in some way which is publicly meaningful. Accountability is an expectation of efficiency, effectiveness and responsibility for any failure to meet the expectations of those who entrusted duties. Through its curriculum, the school has an obligation to educate young people, to enable them to cultivate certain knowledge, skills, potentials and attitudes which will enable them to confer the expected benefits to society. The school therefore should be answerable to the community for performing duties as expected and be held responsible for failure to meet the expectations.

The Department for International Development (DFID) in the UK outlines three approaches to school accountability: *inspections* comprising regulatory school accountability, ensuring compliance with laws and regulations and focusing on inputs and processes within the school; *assessment* focusing on performance/ results-based accountability to improve schools, including the use of periodic school evaluations and mechanisms such as standardised student testing, public reporting of school performance and rewards or sanctions; and *monitoring* which involves the use of systems to monitor or assess performance-based accountability and thus support improvements in administration or management.<sup>13</sup>

## Quality Assurance for Improvement

Quality assurance for improvement of schools should incorporate key features, such as stating explicitly what 'quality' actually means and how it may be 'measured' or represented; ensuring that the key actors are supported in generating and acquiring data on the quality and impact of their work together with developing appropriate responses to their own analysis of need; and helping to create a sense of accountability for the day-to-day work in the school and its classrooms, as well as a shared commitment to high standards. Quality assurance thus also implies development and learning.



There are two main ingredients of quality assurance. First, a comparison of how things are with how things should be. This is the self-evaluation process that in time becomes ongoing and a way of reflecting about practice. Second, taking measures to close the gap between aspiration and practice, with reference to key priorities and agreed objectives.

**Box 1 provides an example of the process and standards used for quality assurance for improvement by CfBT Education Trust.**<sup>14</sup>

### **CfBT standards for quality assurance**

A *Learning Quality Review* provides a school with a detailed analysis of strengths and recommendations for improvement. This can be used by school to document and measure areas of existing quality and to identify areas for improvement.

A Visiting Review Team assesses the performance of a school and the quality of its education against set of standards based on best practice in school evaluation:

- Standard 1: The standards reached by students in their work
- Standard 2: Students' personal development
- Standard 3: Teaching and learning
- Standard 4: Curriculum quality
- Standard 5: Students' health, safety and security
- Standard 6: Leadership and management

**Source: CfBT Education Trust**

Given the multiplicity of stakeholders in schools, educational development and improvement have to be shared among the various stakeholders, depending on their roles and responsibilities. Quality assurance includes devolving responsibility, or decentralising decision-making responsibility at school level. It implies involving stakeholders in a process of change, while at the same time being accountable for the impact and success of those changes.

Quality assurance for improvement aims to support teachers and build expertise and capacity in the school to deliver positive outcomes for the learners in the school. Through sharing, understanding and applying standards and expectations, quality assurance helps to raise standards and expectations, as well as levels of consistency across teachers and schools.

## **External and Internal Quality Assurance**

Quality assurance at school level could be external, internal, or often a combination of both. In the former, it is conducted by evaluators who are not staff members of the school concerned, who are often organised into an inspectorate and report to authorities responsible for education or for monitoring and evaluation. An internal evaluation is performed primarily by members of school staff. Both external and internal school evaluations may involve other school stakeholders, such as learners, parents or members of the local community.

External assessment is often undertaken by an education authority to ensure compliance with regulations. In this case, there are highly standardised criteria. If the purpose is to establish the value of an investment made in education, it is vital that it involve an external school appraisal.

External evaluation may be risk-based, that is, undertaken by an authority following the underperformance of schools. Targeting only those schools whose standards need to be raised is an efficient means of raising quality, but it may result in a focus on weaknesses rather than an acknowledgement of what is done well.

The assessors in an external evaluation should be experienced, independent and accredited in their field – not in auditing, but of teaching or leading a school.<sup>15</sup> If the credibility of the external evaluators is in doubt, the quality assurance process may be rejected and recommendations not acted upon.<sup>16</sup>

Some criticisms levelled against external evaluations include the stress they cause for school staff, the amount of time that they take from teaching, and the lack of buy-in from management, which can result in the evaluation report being ignored and no improvements. A peer review evaluation process may assist in mitigating against this sort of stress. A peer review evaluation process, using external evaluators from other schools, allows school leaders and their staff to observe each other's schools in action. These are a mechanism for schools to establish a process of self-reflection and continuous learning, as well as to participate in and support each other's school improvement initiatives in a non-judgemental and collaborative way. The South African Extraordinary Schools Coalition (SAESC) is an example of the use of a peer review evaluation process.

Internal evaluation is essentially self-evaluation by a school and is acknowledged as an important feature of quality assurance processes, especially those whose purpose is mainly developmental, that is, raising standards. Self-evaluation is not a bureaucratic or mechanistic undertaking. It is a reflective professional process, through which schools get to know themselves well and identify the best way forward for their students.<sup>17</sup>

**Box 2 shows the model advocated by the Dubai Schools' Inspection Bureau.<sup>18</sup>**

### **Dubai Schools' Inspection Bureau model of self-evaluation**

The model offers a concise summary of self-evaluation process in schools. The process involves:

- Review: collect qualitative and quantitative evidence to answer the question – How are we doing?
- Reflect: on the vision, aims, values and promises to parents to determine – How well should we be doing?
- React: prioritise which actions will bring about the desired changes and design measurable success criteria and timeframes to establish – What will we do to improve?

**Source: Dubai Schools Inspection Bureau**

This kind of reflective process is likely to promote well-considered innovation when undertaken by schools 'driven by the twin desires to do the best, and to be seen to be doing so'.<sup>19</sup> MacBeath contends that the bottom-up approach compensates for the drawbacks of external evaluation as a basis for quality assurance, and it enables the real day-to-day experiences of learners and their teachers to be observed.<sup>20</sup>

However, it should be acknowledged that an internal evaluation of quality has limitations and detractors. It lacks perspective: an outsider can often identify at a glance some practice that is having a detrimental influence

on teaching and learning. Teachers may not be trained to evaluate and may be reluctant to criticise a peer.<sup>21</sup> Self-evaluation has the propensity to be subjective, rather than benefitting from the broader experience of an external assessor or mentor and the opportunity to be benchmarked against similar schools.

As a result of the 'pros' and 'cons' of both external and internal evaluation, a mixed model combining both forms of quality assurance is common. The external evaluators make use of the findings of the internal processes which are carried out according to guidelines, instruments and/or manuals provided. There should be a number of quality criteria or descriptors to give the process a structure that can be replicated and used for comparison and re-evaluation. Through self-evaluation, a school may continuously improve its standards, but an external audit is necessary to confirm the findings impartially and to give the assurance that a specified standard of quality exists.

## The Financial Viability of Low-Fee Independent Schools: International Experience

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International research on the financial viability of LFIS has provided some important insights about their affordability in terms of household spending on education, access by poor children, and the relative cost of public and private schools, risks to low-fee schools' sustainability.

Critical to LFIS' financial viability is their affordability for poorer communities. International researchers have pointed out that in analysing the financial viability of the LFIS market it is important to recognise that households carry the burden of the largest portion of non-state spending on education. This includes direct spending related to attending schools, such as school fees, the cost of uniforms and school supplies, as well as transport and meals. It can also include indirect spending such as private tutoring and other extra-curricular activities. Household spending on education can be substantial and a barrier for the poor.

Globally there is a lack of data on total spending on school fees and other household spending on education, and only rough estimates are possible. A survey in 15 African countries suggests that total household spending amounted to 1.7 per cent of GDP on average, equivalent to a little under half of public expenditure (at 3.7 per cent of GDP). Assuming that this sample of African countries is representative of low-income countries in general, a rough estimate suggests that households in low income countries spend around \$12 billion on basic education, in comparison to the governments' \$36 billion spend.<sup>22</sup> This indicates that household expenditure on education makes a substantial contribution to the education provision in developing countries.

The extent to which the poorest children can access low-fee private schools is a key issue and is raised by the opponents of these schools. They also question whether poor families should be spending money on private schooling to the possible neglect of other essential needs such as health services. Surprisingly, Heyneman and Stern's case study research in 2013 of LFIS across six countries (Kenya, Tanzania, Ghana, Pakistan, Indonesia and Jamaica) found that the difference in cost between a free public school and a low tuition fee private school was modest (or even negligible) in some countries, yet the difference in output could be substantial. For instance, in Ghana they found that the cost of sending a child to an unregistered private school was 12 per cent of

the minimum wage, and the cost of a registered private school was 20 per cent of the minimum wage. In comparison, the cost of sending a child to a free public school (where the private cost of uniforms and other direct and indirect costs were still significant) was 16 per cent of the minimum wage. They point out that in this case, it may be less expensive for a low-income family to send a child to an unregistered private school, and it may be more cost-effective to send a child to a registered private school with good academic results.<sup>23</sup>

Using its School Rating Programme, in 2012 GMC undertook an analysis of a sample of 200 affordable private schools (APS) in Hyderabad, Delhi and Bangalore in India.<sup>24</sup> These schools were independently owned and operated by local entrepreneurs to serve a large population of the working poor and lower income families. It is a landmark study because it specifically analysed the relationships between fee-level, financial viability, and education quality.

The main findings are summarised below:

- GMC found that a strong correlation exists between the fees that APS charge and student learning outcomes. The fees of the 200 schools ranged from below INR400 (R90) per month (low-fee schools), to fees between INR400 and INR750 (mid-fee schools) and those above INR750 (R170) per month (high-fee schools). Monthly fees of INR235 schools were found to be the threshold below which schools find it difficult to perform well. The low-fee schools charging fees below INR400 per month (R90) either lacked the basic facilities and resources required to create a conducive learning environment or were financially unsustainable. By contrast, none of the mid- and high-fee schools in the sample performed poorly. GMC estimated that a small increase in the fees of the lowest fee schools of INR100 (R23) a month could lead to a seven per cent increase in student outcomes. However, beyond this threshold a fee increase does not guarantee significantly better performance, as this depends upon many other factors.
- Teaching quality was found to be the key differentiating factor between the 20 top performing schools and the 20 bottom performing schools. In the 20 top schools, teachers were far better qualified than those in the bottom 20 schools, attrition was lower, pedagogy significantly better, as was teacher and student attendance. The other contributing factors were management competency, parent engagement practices, and availability of financial surplus and of learning infrastructure like a library, computer laboratory, digital classroom and science laboratories.
- The differences between the management and leadership competencies of the top 20 and bottom 20 schools were considerable: school leaders in the top 20 schools had a growth plan for the school including enrolment targets, teacher development, technology and other infrastructure investment plans.
- In terms of their financial performance, only a handful of the assessed schools prepared audited income statements and balance sheets. The top 20 schools were able to generate a higher operational surplus. These schools recorded an average operating margin of 26 per cent compared to an average of five per cent in the bottom 20 schools. Parents were also more satisfied with the top 20 schools. This is an important issue because low satisfaction can reduce student enrolment as students are moved to other schools.
- In the case of chain schools, it was found that not all the schools in the chain were able to perform as well as the first school. The quality of school management was the key to success: chain schools with a professional management team performed much better than schools run by an individual or family.

Effective chain schools were able to leverage their existing experience and on-ground operations by centralising all the basic functions, ensuring standardised processes and replicating best practices. They also develop a strong second line of management to assist with operational issues and manage day-to-day operations.

- The main problem observed in APS infrastructure was the lack of space owing to capital and time constraints. Finding suitable land and building a school or expanding it is time-consuming and requires capital. The school owners were not able to acquire capital or dedicate time to find suitable buildings for schools. Nor were they able to access affordable loans.
- A positive finding was that in general the APS owners were progressive entrepreneurs who readily accepted their shortcomings and were willing to try new solutions to improve learning outcomes. For example, most of the APS had started using blended learning techniques, using phonics, digital classrooms, games, handheld devices and other learning aids. As a response to strong competition from other APS, the top school leaders said they would 'provide better learning interventions', 'improve learning facilities' and 'hire better teachers'.<sup>25</sup>

GMC concluded that APS have the potential to provide access to good quality education for low income communities across the world. However, schools that are not performing will need 'more targeted support and handholding from the APS ecosystem, while progressive APS need solutions, products and services which can help them improve further'.<sup>26</sup> Not surprisingly, GMC advocates 'an outcome based rating and accreditation model to help monitoring the performance of such schools'.

In addition, GMC recommends ways in which donors, investors and providers can assist APS. These include technology-enabled learning solutions, innovative teacher training programmes, school infrastructure leasing, school management/advisory services, school accreditation, leadership mentoring and access to resources.

## The Financial Viability of Low-Fee Independent Schools: South African Reality

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CDE's 2015 analysis of 23 'stand-alone' low-fee independent schools and four chains of schools to determine the key factors that influence financial viability and what would be required to establish a financially viable low-fee school was pioneering research in South Africa.<sup>27</sup>

In that analysis 'financially viable' was defined as a school's or chain's ability to generate sufficient income to meet its operating expenses and other financial obligations, while 'sustainable' was used to mean financially viable over the longer term.<sup>28</sup> CDE identified a low-fee school as one that charged fees below R12 000 per year (in 2014), which roughly equates to the provincial average estimate (of expenditure) per learner (PAEPL) in an ordinary public school, on which the calculation of the percentage subsidy for a qualifying not-for-profit independent school is based.<sup>29</sup>

CDE's analysis and modelling showed that:

- Two types of 'hypothetical' low-fee schools are financially viable: a 'no-frills' primary school offering a good but basic education, and an innovative secondary school delivering quality schooling through a blend of classroom teaching and online learning.
- Stand-alone low-fee schools would be viable if they are not-for-profit and obtain a state subsidy. These schools would need to charge fees of R11 700 a year (2013 fees), obtain a 40 per cent subsidy and enrol some 600 to 700 learners by the third year of operation. This will enable them to repay a loan of some R30 million at five per cent interest over 20 years.<sup>30</sup>
- Economies of scale make a significant difference to operational costs of low-fee schools. If the hypothetical stand-alone school is part of a chain of three schools with centralised administration, it could reduce costs and would be more viable. School size is critical: a large learner enrolment makes a school more cost-effective.
- A for-profit chain of ten schools charging fees of R11 700 per annum, with over 600 learners in each school and centralised administration, would be viable and able to cover the finance costs of a R30 million loan at five per cent interest over 20 years.
- Providing and maintaining adequate facilities, including science laboratories, a library (resource centre) and only a few sports fields (or hiring them), offering a limited range of subjects and outsourcing extras, would keep costs down.
- The use of innovative models of schooling, such as blended learning, different staffing models and flexible use of learning space can also significantly reduce costs.<sup>31</sup>

In terms of access for really poor children in South Africa, fees of R11 700 are too high. CDE's research has confirmed that to provide access to quality education in even poorer communities where the need is greatest, the annual fees should be no higher than R6 000, and ideally even less.<sup>32</sup>

Many low-fee schools do exist that charge fees of less than R6 000 a year. However, most of the lowest fee schools are survivalist, living from year to year and month to month, not knowing whether they will be able to meet their financial obligations. Even with lower fees and lower learner enrolments, low-fee schools survive because they provide good education, although they are in basic premises (which they do not own), are poorly resourced and pay considerably lower teacher salaries than public schools. They also struggle to comply with the regulatory demands of government, so some exist illegally as unregistered schools. Typically, they have never taken out a loan.

CDE's analysis identified considerable risks and challenges in establishing and sustaining low-fee independent schools:

1. The main risks were external:

- Although the South African Constitution protects the existence of independent schools and the foundational legislation is supportive, the regulatory environment is increasingly disempowering. The complex maze of legislation from all sectors of government impedes the establishment of new schools and imposes very high compliance costs which low-fee independent schools struggle to meet. More accountability (with severe sanctions for non-compliance) is also demanded from independent schools than public schools; and

- The lack of capacity in government departments and statutory bodies results in delays in registration, payment of subsidies, and accreditation. If a new school is not registered in good time or the subsidies are reduced or late, the cost of establishing and running a low-fee school increases significantly.

2. The key challenges in running a school include:

- increasing and maintaining sufficient learner enrolment for cost-effectiveness
- securing affordable premises
- obtaining loan finance at affordable interest rates to enable expansion to a cost-effective size, buying or building new premises
- paying adequate teacher salaries since low salaries can result in high teacher turnover
- ensuring timely and full payment of school fees, tight control over income and expenditure and quality teaching and learning
- the selection of the right principal and teachers as the 'secret sauce', critical for the success of the school. They have to embed a values-based ethos, establish sound discipline and set high academic standards
- finding the right balance between affordable fees, financial viability and quality.

CDE's findings underlined the importance of scale, innovation, strong leadership, good financial management, suitable facilities, competent teachers, positive values and sound discipline in financially viable schools - almost all the same elements that GMC found. Interestingly, CDE's recommendations on the forms of support that donors and/or investors could provide to improve the schools' operations and delivery of quality education virtually mirror those of GMC.<sup>33</sup>

## Assessing Quality and Financial Viability in Low-Fee Independent Schools: Lessons for South Africa

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Among the many possible areas for evaluation identified in existing instruments, six components were identified as essential for the provision of quality education:

Component 1: School Governance and Financial Management

Component 2: School Leadership

Component 3: Physical Learning Environment (Infrastructure)

Component 4: Health, Safety and Security

Component 5: Teaching, Learning, and Attainments

Component 6: Community and Stakeholder Involvement

This section considers each of these six components with particular focus on the definition and key constructs in order to explicate their importance. Illustrative examples of the processes and ratings systems are provided where appropriate, taken mainly from four large private school assessment systems: Bridge International



Academies; GMC; The Punjab Education Foundation (PEF) - Foundation Assisted Schools (FAS) programme; and the Private Education Assistance Committee Instrument used by the Fund for Assistance to Private Education (FAPE).

It is important to note that some features of the components may be beyond the reach of some of the LFIS given their, origins, resources, and context. For example, under Component 2, the school owner and the school head are the same person, or they are different people who share aspects of the leadership role. In Component 3, the quality and size of the physical environment is often hampered by the location of the schools in highly populated informal settlements or congested inner cities, and a concomitant lack of access to funds from the parents, donors or investors to expand or improve their facilities. With Component 5, schools find it difficult to find teachers with the requisite subject and pedagogical knowledge, which in turn is exacerbated by the considerable teacher turnover owing to the schools' low salaries. In terms of Component 6, there are multiple constraints stemming from the poverty of the care-givers, the long hours they work, and the fact that many are poorly educated, or who are first-generation learners themselves, who thus find it very difficult to assist the learners with their homework or support their learning.

## **Component 1: School Governance and Financial Management**

Governance is a critical factor in creating enabling conditions for quality learning.<sup>34</sup> At the system level, good governance determines what education policies and priorities will be put in place; how much funding will be available to education and how these resources will be distributed, used, managed and accounted for; how the powers and functions of governing education will be distributed across the different layers and actors within the system and to what extent the rule of law and transparency will be maintained, so that those who hold powers are accountable for their performance.

At the institutional level, governance ensures the deployment of qualified, motivated and accountable personnel (teachers/facilitators and leaders/managers). It ensures that learners are provided with high quality and relevant curriculum materials, are engaged in learning and have adequate support from their teachers/facilitators. Good governance gives critical stakeholders (for example, parents, local community members, civil society, the private sector) the opportunity to participate in decision-making and contribute to learning processes. Poor governance can seriously undermine all the educational positives listed above.

Governance indicators, as well as indicators of sound management of a school's finances, need to be effective in determining how well the school is managed. Governors' responsibilities include providing financial oversight and supporting the school in achieving its stated mission. Good governance and financial management are vital if either donors' or investors' money or expertise is to be applied to a school. Independent governors, whose roles are accurately defined in a constitution and then implemented, provide an extra check and balance in governance, which should be encouraged. The lack of independent governors is typical in owner/principal schools (often beginning as a pre-school) that evolve into fully-fledged independent schools. However, the lack of a school governing body with independent governors, does not mean that they are poorly-led and badly managed. There are already governance safeguards arising from the requirements for becoming a legal entity, registering as a school, and obtaining a NPO certificate from the Department of Social Development. In the case of PBO status, the governance requirements include an independent director appointed who is not a family member or closely linked to the owners.

## Component 2: School leadership

Well-managed schools and classrooms contribute to educational quality.<sup>35</sup> School management, teachers and learners should all observe school and classroom rules and policies, which should be clear, logical, and understandable.

Quality leadership is vital to providing teachers and learners with support, motivation and guidance towards good quality teaching and learning. In schools, the primary leadership responsibility typically falls to the principal, but leadership is often delegated to the school management team, generally departmental heads. School leadership may extend to include members of the parent-teacher associations and governing bodies.

The key to an effective school is to have a great educational or instructional leader in charge. Leadership is the ability to create a unified vision among followers, set goals, develop strategies to meet desired accomplishments and motivate, encourage and serve as a positive and ethical example to others. A good instructional leader understands what should be done to improve academic conditions and the learner experience. However, various theories of leadership styles exist in education, and these determine the leader's relationship with others, as well as his/her leadership style.

A good leader:

- has a deep knowledge of the field, a willingness to take risks, plus a breadth of vision and thinking that transcends individual programmes, services or organisations
- is innovative, but sensitive to history, diversity and context, and is also collaborative yet bold
- is goal oriented, has a planning orientation, assertive, proactive, professionally confident, visionary, influential and a mentor or guide
- develops good working relationships with all concerned within the centre, acknowledges staff strengths and provides constructive feedback, assists less qualified staff, helps in resolving staff disagreements and participates in, but doesn't dominate, decision making.<sup>36</sup>
- As an example, Table 1 provides a summary of the Bharatiya Jain Sanghatana (BJS)<sup>37</sup> assessment system in India, which uses three simple indicators and 11 points to consider when rating the quality of leadership in a LFIS.

**Table 1: An example of Indicators for Assessing Leadership**

Indicators	Points to look out to verify Indicators
Instructional	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Availability of motivational environment and space for appreciating student achievement</li><li>2. Annual academic plan</li><li>3. Availability of effective systems to conduct student assessment/s</li><li>4. Head teacher's ability as leader and appropriate educational qualifications</li><li>5. Opportunity for the head teacher to continually update his/her knowledge of school management and leadership</li></ol>
Faculty (Teaching staff)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>6. Updated knowledge of teachers, according to market demand</li><li>7. System in place or record kept for regular teacher meeting and exchange of ideas</li></ol>
Operational	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>8. Implementation of effective school operational plan in place</li><li>9. Participation of school in the world outside of the school</li><li>10. Relationship with and support by schools with all its stakeholders</li><li>11. Regular presentations and updates on school progress by functionaries with school management</li></ol>

**Source: BJS Assessment System**

The capabilities, character and attitudes of the leader determine whether there is also a positive ethos, values-based system, discipline, motivation and drive to improve at his/her school.

In South African independent schools, instructional leadership and discipline, both of teachers and learners, are usually delegated to the deputy principal who needs the authority and support of the principal to be effective. Student attendance and discipline are also vital factors indicating a high functioning school as determined by better results than at neighbouring state schools where discipline and attendance are poor.

### **Component 3: Physical Learning Environment (Infrastructure)**

Learning can occur anywhere, but high-level learning outcomes happen in good quality learning environments. Learning environments comprise physical, psychosocial and service delivery elements.

The quality of the physical environment and infrastructure is strongly linked to the quality of the learning that can take place.<sup>38</sup> An optimal quality learning environment is considered to be a physical space that supports multiple and diverse teaching and learning programmes and pedagogies, including current technologies; one that demonstrates optimal, cost-effective performance and operation over time; one that respects and is in harmony with the environment; and one that encourages social participation, providing a healthy, comfortable, safe, well-lit, secure and stimulating setting for its occupants.

In poorer communities, facilities and the general learning environment are often of poor quality largely because of lack of resources in the community. Bridge International Academies in Kenya has used technology and data to drive efficiencies, in terms of the establishment of the school infrastructure, managing the overhead costs required to run an academy and in terms of increasing the quality of the output. For example, Bridge has a prescribed cost and design for establishing the school structure and only one employee involved in management – the Academy Manager. The vast majority of non-instructional activities that an Academy Manager would normally handle (billing, payments, expense management, payroll processing, prospective admissions, and more) are all automated and centralised through a combination of the Academy Manager’s smartphone application and the teachers’ tablet application, all connected to a customised backend suite of integrated software applications. This systemisation frees the Academy Manager to focus on the critical work that must be executed locally – overseeing classroom instruction and building, as well as managing relationships with parents and the local community.

The reality is, however, that most low-fee schools have resource limitations that affect the extent of their libraries, computer and science laboratories, teaching and learning materials and digital equipment, as well as their facilities. A lack of this sort of infrastructure may make the provision of quality education more challenging, but does not mean that quality education is not possible. Well utilised resource-constrained spaces can still provide rich learning spaces if managed well and used in innovative ways.

#### **Component 4: Health, Safety and Security**

There are aspects of the physical learning environment and school infrastructure discussed in the previous section that overlap with issues of learner health, safety and security. For example, at a minimum, a healthy and safe school environment will have sufficient and well maintained sanitation facilities that are easily accessible, provide privacy and security and promote health hygiene. It will also have sufficient basic water (supplied by the municipal network, rain water harvesting, mobile tankers, or a borehole) available for drinking, personal hygiene, and where appropriate, food preparation.<sup>39</sup> Schools should also be surrounded by an appropriate fence, to ensure the safety of the teachers and learners in the school grounds.

But issues of health and safety in schools go beyond the physical well-being of learners. They include their emotional well-being. Within schools and classrooms, a welcoming and non-discriminatory climate is critical to creating a safe learning environment. Quality education includes ensuring that learners learn in environments that are safe, protective and gender-sensitive, as well as providing adequate resources and facilities.<sup>40</sup> Bullying (both physical and emotional) and sexual abuse must be effectively monitored and addressed in order to ensure a safe and healthy learning environment.

Sensible and effective management of health and safety relies on every member of the management team making sure that risk is managed responsibly and proportionately.

#### **Component 5: Teaching, Learning, and Attainment**

All the LFIS assessment frameworks reviewed (see Appendix A) place teaching and learning processes as the main constituent of their school quality assessment. While some indicators of good teaching and learning are relatively simple, determining others can be challenging, since they are linked to the values and beliefs in educational purpose and the children’s upbringing.

Quality teachers are considered to be those that use child-centred teaching approaches in well-managed classrooms and schools, as well as skilful assessment to facilitate learning and reduce disparities. Defining the precise characteristics of a successful teacher is very difficult, however the International Step by Step Association (ISSA) identifies a list of successful teacher practices or ‘principles’ that act as indicators of good teachers, which has been adapted and summarised in Table 2.

**Table 2: Principles for Quality Instruction**

Principles	The Teacher.....
Interactions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>interacts with children in a friendly and respectful manner that supports the development of each child’s construction self/identity and learning</li> <li>promotes the development of a learning community where each child feels s/he belongs and is supported to reach his/her potential</li> <li>engages in purposeful, reciprocal interactions with other adults to support children’s development and learning</li> </ul>
Family and community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>promotes partnerships with families and provides a variety of opportunities for families and community members to be involved in children’s development</li> <li>uses formal and informal opportunities for communication and information-sharing with families</li> <li>uses community resources and family culture to enrich children’s development</li> </ul>
Inclusion, diversity and values of democracy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>provides equal opportunities for every child and family to learn and participate</li> <li>helps children understand, accept, and appreciate diversity</li> <li>develops children’s understanding of the values of civil society and the skills required for participation.</li> </ul>
Assessment and planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>regularly and systematically monitors each child’s progress and achievements</li> <li>includes children, families, and relevant professionals in the assessment and planning process</li> </ul>
Teaching strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>implements a variety of teaching strategies that actively engage children to develop knowledge, skills, and dispositions as defined by national requirements, and which build the foundation for lifelong learning</li> <li>uses teaching strategies that support children’s emotional and social development</li> <li>designs activities taking into account children’s experiences and competencies to support and expand further development and learning.</li> </ul>
Learning environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>provides a learning environment that promotes each child’s well-being.</li> <li>provides an environment that promotes the children’s sense of community and participation in creating the classroom’s culture.</li> </ul>
Professional development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>continually improves his/her competences to reach and maintain high quality in the teaching profession according to the changing demands of today’s world</li> </ul>

**Source: Adapted from International Step by Step Association (ISSA)<sup>41</sup>**

While these indicators help evaluate teacher quality at the classroom level, there are also systemic issues outside the classroom that have a major impact on teacher quality. Key constructs for these systemic issues would include quantitative and qualitative data on initial training, professional development, remuneration, and working conditions.

## Component 6: Community and Stakeholder Involvement

Parent and community participation in the basic education process is key to maximising the learning outcomes for children and supporting the school. Important reasons for involving parents and the community are:

- establishing better understanding of children by teachers;
- promoting appropriate education practices attitudes and behaviours towards children among parents and the community; and
- providing parent/staff with information and referrals to other services.

The concept of parental participation varies widely by context so it is not possible to reach universal agreement on exactly what counts as effective parental involvement. There are two broad strands: parents' involvement in the life of the school; and their involvement in support of the individual child at home and at school. Some examples of quality involvement in the life of the school include: parents invited to take part in school events; they receive regular feedback on their child's performance in school from teachers and provide feedback to the teachers; parents interact with school leaders; and parents provide resources to strengthen learning. In addition, whether parents are invited to participate in planning, assessment and evaluation, help to interpret data about their child, attend workshops on education matters, contribute to the education programme and provide support for their children's assignments, can also be used as indicators.

In the Philippines, the Department of Education (DepEd) has an Education Service Contracting Programme (ESC) to fund learners going to private junior high schools. The Fund for Assistance to Private Education (FAPE), a private organisation, implements this programme and commissioned the PEAC to develop a quality assurance mechanism to assess if a private school complies with DepEd's minimum quality standards, as well as evaluate a school's characteristics, its qualitative traits of excellence and level of performance.

This quality assurance tool is designed to assess accountability and build effective and high performing schools through continuous focused improvement efforts. It guides both the school and certifiers in evaluating seven critical areas for quality student performance and organisational effectiveness: School Philosophy, Vision, Mission, Goals/Objectives, Instructional Program, School Personnel, Faculty Personnel, and Non-Teaching Personnel, Student Services, Administration and Governance, School Budget and Finances, and Institutional Planning and Development.

This mechanism has also developed useful criteria for evaluating community engagement. In the Administrative and Governance section of the FAPE/PEAC mechanism, there are seven indicators to assess whether the school staff is maintaining purposeful, active, positive relationships with families of its learners and with the community in which it operates in order to support student learning.

Under *School Culture and Climate* there are four indicators:

- school management gives internal and external stakeholders meaningful roles in the decision-making process that promote a culture of participation, responsibility, and ownership;
- collaboration and shared responsibility for the school improvement occur across grade levels and content areas among administration, school personnel and students;
- for the promotion of a positive learning climate, staff work together to build a culture of learning that supports improved student outcomes; and
- the school staff maintain purposeful, active, positive relationships with the families of its students and with the community.

In addition, under *Social Orientation and Community Involvement* there are three indicators to assess if the school:

- is well-informed about its own geographic, socio-cultural environment as well as that of the community it serves in its outreach programme;
- collaborates with families and other community members, responds to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilises community resources; and
- provides a programme which encourages community involvement and support of teachers, parents, and alumni in its improvement plans and initiatives.

## Assessing Quality and Financial Viability

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School evaluation processes and their instruments can be complicated and time-consuming. They also require professional expertise to use them, make valid judgements and determine a rating for the school in each area investigated.

The FAPE/PEAC assessment process includes three steps:

- School self-evaluation for compliance with the minimum standards, providing a portfolio of evidence and producing an improvement plan;
- A site-visit from the school certifiers; and
- Implementation of the certifiers' recommendations by the school.

As in the case of high-stakes, quality assurance processes that carry the possibility of obtaining funding or not, the certifiers for FAPE/PEAC have to be experienced, trained teachers with personal and professional integrity.

A key issue in developing an assessment instrument is the rating scale and the descriptors used. Here the FAPE/PEAC instrument provides a helpful example. The rating system to assess compliance with the Minimum Quality Standards uses a 0-4 scale as shown in Table 3 below.



Each of the seven Standard Areas is introduced by an explanatory paragraph outlining the basis for the evaluation. Different areas are assigned different weights indicating their relative importance in relation to the total evaluation. The 'Instructional Program' Area has the highest weight. The 'School Philosophy, Goals and Objectives' Area serves as the philosophical framework of the survey. It determines the clarity of the guideposts in evaluating the school.

The rating of each statement is based on verifiable facts and evidence, interviews with concerned stakeholders, as well as the certifier's personal observations, assessment and evaluation. Each statement is scored in a scale of four to zero, with four as the most desirable condition and zero indicating that the minimum standard is not complied with at all.

**Table 3: Rating and Descriptors in the FAPE/PEAC Tool**

Rating	Description	Extent of Compliance with DepEd Minimum Standards
4	Approaching Excellence	Provision or condition is very extensive and functioning excellently
3	Exceeding the Minimum Standard	Provision or condition is extensive and functioning very satisfactorily
2	Practicing the Minimum Standard	Provision or condition is satisfactorily met and functioning satisfactorily
1	Approaching the Minimum Standard	Provision or condition is limited and barely functioning
0	Missing the Required Minimum Standard	Provision or condition is missing but necessary

An ESC school with an overall rating of 2 and higher is to be given a certification status valid for three school years. An overall rating of 3.8 to 4 indicates that the school may be ready for voluntary accreditation, a category which is above the minimum DepEd standards. However, if an ESC school has an overall rating lower than 2, the school is given one year to implement the recommendations given. Should the school fail to get an overall rating of 2 after the revisit, the school is automatically disqualified from participating in the ESC Programme.

# Concluding Remarks

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In order to explore the relationships between quality, fee-level, and financial viability in low-fee independent schools in South Africa, CDE has undertaken extensive research internationally and locally over a number of years. This report builds on this research to provide guidelines for an appropriate, effective and simple evaluation instrument for use in South Africa for the purpose of appraising the quality and viability of LFIS that potential donors or investors might be interested in supporting. The findings discussed in this report are of value also to school founders and leaders, edupreneurs, parents, government and the general public. It provides important insights into the elements of quality provision in LFIS, and the financial challenges that these schools serving poor communities face in achieving sustainability.

Achieving high quality doesn't happen by accident – it must be carefully planned, worked at tirelessly and monitored. A sound appraisal of quality and financial health is beneficial for any school and can be a vital process in ensuring both its academic and financial success.

# Endnotes

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1. There is no internationally accepted term for low-fee independent schools: in some countries they are called low-fee private schools (LFPS), low-cost private schools (LCPS), affordable private schools (APS), and in others, budget schools. In South Africa, private schools are officially known as independent schools, hence they are called low-fee independent schools.
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29. The 'estimate' per learner refers to the estimated expenditure in the provincial education budget for the following financial year as opposed to the actual expenditure in the previous financial year. 'Public ordinary schools' exclude those public schools for learners with special educational needs and technical high schools, where the costs per learner are significantly higher than in public ordinary schools.'
30. The state subsidy is limited to not-for-profit independent schools that serve disadvantaged communities and achieve good learner results. Schools that qualify are subsidised according to a sliding scale based on the level of their published fee. A qualifying school can obtain between 15 and 60 per cent of what a province spends on the education of a public school learner. To obtain a 60 per cent subsidy the school fees have to be below R6 000 a year, and between R6,000 and R12,000 for a 40 per cent subsidy.
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# Appendix A: Summary of Assessment Instruments and Frameworks Reviewed

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## **Cross-national frameworks (5).**

- Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE Minimum Standards Global Best Practice)
- OECD (International School Improvement Project)
- UNESCO (Tool for Quality Assurance of Education for Democratic Citizenship in schools (EDC))
- UNICEF (A Framework and Tool Box for Monitoring and Improving Quality of Early Childhood Education)
- UNICEF (Child Friendly Schools)

## **National systems (10)**

- Afghanistan (Ministry of Education)
- Australia (School Review Framework)
- England (Framework for Inspection of Schools)
- Guyana (Monitoring, Evaluation, Research & Development Primary & secondary checklists)
- India (NABET Accreditation)
- India (State of Karnataka)
- Ireland (Whole school evaluation)
- Pakistan (ASER Pakistan 2010)
- UAE (Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Northern Emirates)
- South Africa (Whole school evaluation)

<b>International Private (13)</b>	<b>SA private schools (4)</b>	<b>SA public schools (5)</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adhyayan Asia (Adhyayan Quality Standard and Quality Assurance)</li> <li>• ARK (MPSQA - Madhya Pradesh School Quality Assessment)</li> <li>• Bharatiya Jain Sanghatana (EDUQIP Educational Quality Improvement Program)</li> <li>• Central Board for Secondary Education (CBSE) Accreditation (School Quality Assessment and Accreditation Process SQAA)</li> <li>• CFBTES (Academic Audit/Institutional Audit)</li> <li>• M-CRIL (School rating/assessment)</li> <li>• The Teacher Foundation (Whole school turnaround)</li> <li>• National Association of Independent Schools, USA (Demonstrating Independent School Quality: Inventory of Institutional Assessment Instruments)</li> <li>• IFC (International)</li> <li>• Bridge International Academies</li> <li>• Gray Matters Capital (GMC)</li> <li>• The Punjab Education Foundation (PEF) - Foundation Assisted Schools (FAS) programme</li> <li>• The PEAC Instrument used by the Fund for Assistance to Private Education (FAPE)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Umalusi Quality Assurance</li> <li>• Independent Schools Association of Southern Africa (ISASA) membership application form</li> <li>• Independent Quality Assurance Agency (IQAA) school evaluation instrument</li> <li>• Catholic Institute of Education (CIE) Fully Alive, school evaluation instrument</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Together-schools</li> <li>• Khulisa FirstRand</li> </ul>



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