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Allow asylum-seeking teachers to work in SA schools, says refugee body

Wilson Johwa

Political Correspondent

THE Consortium for Refugees and Migrants in SA (Cormsa) is to lobby for qualified asylum seekers to be allowed to work as teachers, arguing that there were many qualified teachers in their ranks.

At present, only confirmed refugees are considered for teaching work in SA. The lack of teachers mainly affects rural schools. The lengthy wait for determination of refugee status and the small number of successful applicants ensure that few make it through the system.

Cormsa advocacy officer Sichel'mpilo Shange-Buthane said a campaign to get asylum seekers considered for teaching positions was one of the organisation's priorities this year.

"They are the majority and many of them do have the skills to teach," she said.

Education department guidelines say that job offers to asylum seekers will not be endorsed until the applicants had secured formal recognition of their refugee status. "This is to prevent any legitimate expectations that a longstanding relationship in SA may be entered into," the policy says.

The guidelines were aimed at regulating the employment of foreign teachers in "underserved" areas of SA, while also protecting available opportunities for South Africans and permanent residents. It rules out support for a foreign teacher wishing to migrate to another province or to an urban area.

Under the regulations, individual applications from developing countries, especially the Southern African Development Community , should not be supported.

But Jon Lewis, spokesman for the South African Democratic Teachers' Union , said the organisation had no objection to foreign teachers, especially from Zimbabwe, being employed to cover the immediate shortage. But there was nothing to be gained regionally "if SA simply creamed off the best", accentuating the brain drain just like countries in the developed north. "Ultimately, SA should simply train more teachers," Lewis said.

Nick Taylor, CEO of Jet Education Services, said the crisis in education was

less about numbers and more to do with how to make existing teachers work more effectively.

"We have a lot of teachers but how effective are they? It's a leadership and management question at every level," he said.

Last year a Zimbabwean school teacher, Zwelani Ncube, won the right to work in SA after he took the home affairs department to court for denying him a work permit.

However, the department has since appealed against the judgment of the Grahamstown High Court, which ruled that Ncube be given a work permit.

Ncube, who arrived in SA on a visitor's visa, applied for a job at the Molteno High School in Eastern Cape in November 2007 as there was no qualified South African applicant to fill the post.

Ncube had not worked for seven of the 10 months he had been in SA.

Students at Molteno High School, including matriculants, had been without an English teacher for most of the ir classes last year.

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