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Parents oppose proposed rule

By HUGO HAGEN

PARENTS have become increasingly uneasy about the possibility that school governing bodies could legally force them to do menial labour if they are unable to pay school fees.

The deadline for public comment on Notice 2793 of 2004 of the Department of Education's proposed regulations on exemptions to school fees was Friday, but parents were still most concerned.

The Alliance for Children's Entitlement to Social Security (Access) says there are deep concerns about the principles underpinning these proposals and their practical implications.

"School policy will be written around the real situation in a specific community," said Access spokesman Sharon September.

"The point these regulations seem to miss is that the parents who need to apply for exemptions are those who are already experiencing difficulties in providing for their children."

Poor parents were assumed to have the spare time to do school-based work, irrespective of health or other responsibilities.

"The new regulations also include an interesting detective role for the school governing body which, in the opinion of parents, would make it nothing more than a debt collecting instrument," the organisation said.

The proposed regulations read: "If a governing body obtains information that the financial position of a parent who was granted exemption has changed substantially, the governing body may reconsider, rescind, amend, substitute or alter its decision to grant exemption."

Ms September said the scope for exploitation of that inherently unequal relationship would be enormous.

"A case in point is that of a mother told to clean toilets to pay off a R900 debt.

"After six months, she was informed she still owed the school money, and that she would be sued for it.

"Her children were embarrassed, she has been exploited and her and her children's right to privacy, a good name and integrity had been seriously damaged."

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