

Children of foreign nationals at Eastleigh Primary School

The Psychological Society of South Africa (PsySSA) has noted with great concern the media reports of the Eastleigh Primary School's threat to hand over children of foreign nationals to the police should their parents not have updated immigration documents. While we respect the need for immigration documentation, PsySSA adopts a firm stance against policies or practices that place children in harm's way either physically or emotionally. Handing children to the police is a most revolting response to any perceived error or omission on the part of parents. As psychologists we can confirm that young children will be severely traumatised by such an extreme response.

The additional media report that the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE) had requested the school to withdraw the statement and instead instruct parents without the updated immigration documents to keep their children at home, is also of concern (if that is correctly reported). While PsySSA views as positive the intervention from the GDE we strongly advise against barring affected children from school. It must be noted that school attendance is critical for children regardless of their citizenship or other administrative issues. Schooling serves numerous vital functions, not only the obvious one relating to scholastic progress. Children need the structure that schooling provides, and this is even more relevant for children of immigrant families who have, in most cases, moved to our country to escape civil war, poverty or other socio-economic hardships that have pervaded their countries of origin.

Through school attendance immigrant and refugee children interact with local children and integrate into South African society. This is also necessary if we want to reduce the xenophobic responses that have dogged parts of our country in recent years. As a country that has managed to avoid a civil war, we should never forget that a mere three decades ago large numbers of South Africans sought refuge in neighbouring countries to escape the brutal armed forces of the apartheid government.

All parents want a better life for their children, and given PsySSA's concern over child development, especially on the African continent, we plead with our government to allow and encourage school attendance by every child who is currently within the borders of our country.