ZERO DROP OUT

# SCHOOL DROPOUT

ADVOCACY TO ACTION / 2024

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Is our society doing enough to address school dropout in South Africa and its consequences?

DISCUSS.

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MARKS: 150

TIME: 3hrs

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## ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|---|---|
| **ALP** | Accelerated Learning Programme |
| **ASAP!** | Academic Support Action Plan |
| **CAPS** | Curriculum Assessment Policy Statements |
| **COVID-19** | Coronavirus Disease 2019 |
| **DBE** | Department of Basic Education |
| **DHET** | Department of Higher Education and Training |
| **DDD** | Data-Driven Districts |
| **ECD** | Early Childhood Development |
| **EES** | Ehsaas Education Stipends |
| **ENTRE** | National Strategy for Successful Transition |
| **EWS** | Early Warning Systems |
| **GDP** | Gross Domestic Product |
| **GEC** | General Education Certificate |
| **GRADES** | Getting Results: Access and Delivery of Quality Education Services in Punjab |
| **IDPP** | Individual Dropout Prevention Plan |
| **NC(V)** | National Certificate (Vocational) |
| **NEET** | Not in Education, Employment or Training |
| **NGO** | Non-Governmental Organisation |
| **NPO** | Non-Profit Organisation |
| **NSC** | National Senior Certificate |
| **NCMS** | National Case Management System |
| **OECD** | Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development |
| **SALDRU** | Southern Africa Labour And Development Research Unit |
| **SAQA** | South African Qualifications Authority |
| **SDG4** | Sustainable Development Goal 4 |
| **STA DEEP** | Sindh Technical Assistance for Development through Enhanced Education Programme |
| **STATS SA** | Statistics South Africa |
| **TaRL** | Teaching at the Right Level |
| **TVET** | Technical Vocational Education and Training |
| **UNESCO** | United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization |
| **USD** | United States Dollar |

## GLOSSARY

**GRADE PROGRESSION -** Learners are automatically promoted to the next grade without having met the basic assessment requirements for promotion.

**HOME LANGUAGE -** The language(s) a child speaks at home and from birth. This is also referred to as "mother tongue," "primary language" or "first language." Many children are from multilingual homes and have been raised speaking two or more languages as home languages. This report uses the singular "home language" for the purpose of consistency.

**LANGUAGE OF LEARNING AND TEACHING -** The language of instruction at school. This is also referred to as the medium of instruction.

**LEARNER PROGRESSION -** Moving a learner automatically to the next grade when they have not met the minimum requirements for promotion. This is also referred to as "grade progression".

**LEARNING LOSSES -** Learning losses refer to time lost to learning as a direct result of school closures and efforts to reduce class sizes through a system of rotational learning. Losses in learning also occur when knowledge acquired prior to school closures is lost.

**ROTATIONAL LEARNING -** Some schools had to alternate in-class attendance days and/or weeks for learners to reduce class size in 2020 and 2021 to comply with the COVID-19 physical distancing regulations.

**SCHOOL DROPOUT -** Also known as early "withdrawal" or "attrition," dropout is leaving the schooling system without obtaining a minimum credential. In South Africa, a learner is considered to have dropped out if they leave school before they obtain a National Senior Certificate (NSC) in Grade 12 or an equivalent certificate such as the National Certificate (Vocational) (NC(V)) or NQF Level 4 (from a post-schooling education and training institution).

# WHAT'S THE STORY?

Zero Dropout Campaign began in 2015 as a research project funded by The DG Murray Trust, but in 2019 grew into a national advocacy campaign. The year 2024 marked the campaign's fifth year and during that time, it has collaborated with several non-profit organisations (NPOs) to develop policy proposals and on-the-ground interventions to illustrate what is necessary to help learners complete Grade 12.

According to the Department of Basic Education (DBE), 87.3% of learners obtained an National Senior Certificate (NSC) in 2024. This is a historic result, and an encouraging 4.4-percentage-point increase from 2023. The DBE also revealed that the throughput rate for the class of 2024 was 64.5%. This however is an alarming 1.1-percentage-point decrease from 2023 and worrying regression in the fight against school dropout.

Twenty-twenty-four was also momentous for the education sector. Parliament finally passed the Basic Education Laws Amendment (BELA) Bill which, despite disagreement from the Minister of Education, was signed into law by President Cyril Ramaphosa in September 2024. After seven years of development, the BELA Act has now ushered in the most comprehensive and significant changes to the regulation of the basic education sector since 1996.

As the country and the education sector undergoes these policy and political changes, now is a prime opportunity to review the current state and efficacy of dropout-related policy, school and administrative practices and public perception in South Africa. Explore this further.

This year's research publication aims to do just that by unpacking new legislation and regulation. The Campaign also commissioned a public opinion survey on the state of basic education and school dropout in South Africa. The findings of that survey are present in this report and confirm our argument that policy changes alone are not enough; we also need to facilitate national ownership of the problem by giving parents, educators, and learners the tools they need to implement solutions.

This is why Zero Dropout Campaign continues to advocate for its years-long recommendations and garner fresh perspectives on why learners drop out of school. This publication will guide the Campaign through its next phase as South Africa also continues its democratic journey. %

# FOREWORD

**ZEENAT SOUJEE**
Section27

**Globally and domestically, the basic education sector faces historic and systemic challenges. Amongst these challenges are prevalent learner dropout rates, which continue to hinder the realisation of the right to basic education guaranteed in the South African Constitution.**

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Through this research publication, *School Dropout: Advocacy to Action, Zero Dropout Campaign* provides a timely and insightful analysis of critical developments and issues that will shape our education sector for years – if not generations – to come.

At the heart of the startling rates of learner dropouts are learners from marginalised backgrounds facing the adverse impacts of historic societal ills and governmental shortcomings.

In response to the dropout rates and education challenges holistically, the recently passed BELA Act 32 of 2024 aligns the basic education legislative and policy framework with the basic education jurisprudential developments and puts some mechanisms in place to address learner dropouts. Section 3 of the Act explicitly calls for role players in schools, namely educators, principals, and school governing bodies (SGBs), to play an active role in curbing dropouts through strict monitoring of learner attendance. This is a positive step towards reducing learner dropouts.

However, the mechanisms place heightened responsibility on educators, principals and SGBs, without addressing the underlying multifaceted issues that cause learner dropout.

On the policy front, DBE introduced the General Education Certificate (GEC), which allows Grade 9 learners to obtain a standardised qualification to acquire the necessary qualifications to enter Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges. The GEC aims to get Grade 9 learners into TVET colleges, offering an opportunity to those who might not ordinarily be interested in completing matric. The legislative and policy developments are a step closer to addressing the learner dropout crisis in South Africa.

Legislative and policy-making are consistent with global initiatives to address learner dropouts. The BELA Act and GEC are steps towards minimising learner dropouts. However, this could only be accomplished if there is political will to implement them. A joint effort by the various role players is needed to ensure that our learners remain in school and acquire safe and quality basic education.

# OUR SURVEY

In 2024, Zero Dropout Campaign conducted research across the country to understand the nuances, perceptions and dynamics that influence dropout rates.

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The research investigated how factors in schools, communities or neighbourhoods, household circumstances, and behavioural attributes influence school performance and, by implication, associated perceptions about dropping out.

The report highlights that although schools are educational facilities in neighbourhoods, they operate within an environment set by the community, government, services, and employment ratios. Schools are not isolated education islands amidst a better or worse functioning community environment. The entire ecosystem of the community within which the school operates is relevant.

Therefore, to address dropout rates, it is important to consider the broader factors that influence performance metrics and dropout rates. Of course, these are very challenging aspects to address as a collective, and it is through greater collaboration that these aspects could be addressed to improve the possible future of the next generation.

The survey design was based on a quota-structured sample to specifically target households with school going children as the largest sample proportion. The survey was complemented with households where children have completed school as well as households with children not in school yet. The perceptions of these three groups were important to include in the overall view of the school system in South Africa. In addition, where permission was granted, children currently in school or those who may have dropped out, were also included in the survey.

The survey's sample design included 1,247 people from 50 of South Africa's 52 district municipalities and metropolitan municipalities.

These interviewees were separated into four clusters –

**CLUSTER 1: Functional, supportive and organised schools in well-managed communities.**

**CLUSTER 2: Reasonably functional schools in challenging communities with some cooperation.**

**CLUSTER 3: Struggling schools in difficult neighbourhood circumstances and social problems.**

**CLUSTER 4: The view that school is a phase to complete and children should plan to work after school.**

# THE STATE OF SCHOOL DROPOUT IN SOUTH AFRICA

South Africa's matric pass rate, considered in isolation, suggests an improvement over time, starting with:

- [x] 58% in 1994
- [x] 76.2% in 2020
- [x] 76.4% in 2021

Despite this improvement and South Africa's large investment in basic education, around 40% of learners who enrol in Grade 1 will exit the schooling system before finishing matric. Many will remain stuck in poverty and unemployment for life.

Past studies have noted that completing school increases employment opportunities and skills development, reduces crime and risky behaviour and promotes equality, health, and overall self-esteem.[1]

South Africa has the highest unemployment rate in the world, with youths (ages 15–24) accounting for 63.9% of those unemployed. Only 44% of these youths had completed secondary school.[2]

The correlation between unemployed youth and those who dropped out of school is clear; attending school until the end of matric is imperative.

Therefore, why children leave school is a question of global concern with varying considerations.

# 1. THE COST OF COVID-19

The World Bank has pointed out that the impact of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic is expected to be long-lasting.[3]

South Africa experienced one of the world's most extensive lockdowns, which had a drastic impact on its education sector. School closures in 2020 resulted in an average loss of 54% of in-person learning time in that year.[4] In addition to substantial losses in face-to-face teaching time, opportunities for remote learning were extremely limited.[5]

Even after schools reopened in mid-2020 via staggered grade return, the majority of schools implemented rotating attendance schedules for over 18 months, leading to further reductions in face-to-face teaching. It was not until February 2022 that daily school attendance fully resumed.

## 2. MATRIC MATTERS

The 2023 General Household Survey by Statistics South Africa's (Stats SA) showed improvements in education and found that the restoration of pre-COVID-19 patterns is "almost complete". The percentage of children aged five and six who were not attending educational institutions in 2020 has declined.

*Think about how this affects their future.*

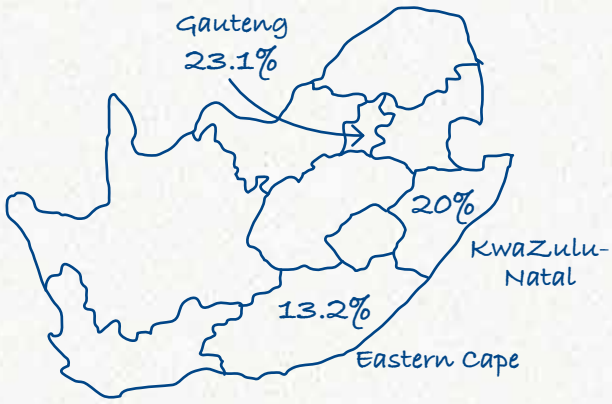
Furthermore, the percentage of those aged 20 years and older without education decreased from 11,4% in 2002 to 3,1% in 2023. Those with Grade 12 qualification or higher increased from 30.5% to 50.8% over the same period.[5]

While access to school and school completion has improved for all races over the past decade, Zero Dropout Campaign maintains that the matric results do not tell the full story about why some learners succeed and others don't. The dropout rate is often obscured by the matric pass rate and subsequent public debates.[6] For the first time in 2023, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) included, *Throughput Indicators* in its NSC Exam Results Technical Report.[7] The matric pass rate and other national indicators, such as the dropout rate, should be collected and published at regular intervals and supplemented by real-time learner-level data.[8]

Zero Dropout Campaign's key advocacy point is a rethinking of the kinds of data collected and used. It's been an advocacy point for the campaign for the past five years.

## 3. NEET YOUTH

The research shows that youth not in education, employment or training (NEET) are a heterogeneous group predominantly comprising female, black, slightly older youth (20-24) who reside in urban areas, live in income poverty and have less than, or only, a matric or matric equivalent. In 2022, the bulk of NEET youth has been consistently over 30% and has worsened over the past decade. Most NEET youth are concentrated in Gauteng (23.1%), KwaZulu-Natal (20%), and the Eastern Cape (13.2%) and these proportions have not changed much since 2013.[9]




*Notably, the Southern Africa Labour And Development Research Unit (SALDRU) revealed that the relatively high proportion of NEET youth in 2023 who have a matric, compared to 2013, indicates a potentially lower protective function of the matric certificate than 10 years ago.*[10,11]

# 4. GENDER BINARY

In 2024's *Understanding Why Youth Drop Out of School* researchers interviewed 41 school dropouts aged 13-20 to understand their reasons for leaving school.[12] Gender differences were identified as factors contributing to leaving school. The 2023 General Household Survey released the same year also notes a gender disparity in family commitment and responsibilities as a reason for young people not attending school.

Discuss further. (200 words)

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Similar to Zero Dropout's 2021 research publication, *School Dropout: Gender Matters*, this new research found that males were more likely to leave school due to poor academic performance and problems with their peers and teachers. Males also left school to pursue technical and artisanal college training to ultimately find employment. Females left school due to caretaking responsibilities and household financial insecurity.

The relationship between gender and educational attainment is similar across sub-Saharan Africa. The Norrag Global Education Centre notes that despite improvements in educational access across the region, significant numbers of learners are still dropping out of school.[13] Indeed, with almost 100 million children not in school, the region has the highest out-of-school population in the world.

Attainment of schooling for girls has increased globally, but gender gaps in schooling remain the largest in lower-income countries. Female enrollment in primary school in low-income countries is 78%, compared to the world average of 88%, and only 31% in secondary school, compared to the global average of 66%.[14] In South Africa, the statistics reveal that 34% of those at lower secondary age and 47% of those at upper secondary age are out of school.[15]

Census 2022 shows that the proportion of persons completing Grade 12 after completing Grade 9 varies according to sex. The data shows that six in ten males go on to pass matric after they've finished Grade 9, while around seven in ten females do.

Unfortunately, educational programmes often focus on life skills development and earning an income. Fewer programmes integrate a 'gender-differentiated' component to determine what interventions could work to prevent this.[16]

There is however significant potential to institute dropout prevention measures. Like Zero Dropout Campaign, Norrag highlights the importance of accurate information to detect and track dropouts in their early stages in order to do so.

47% of girls at upper secondary age are out of school

basic education
Department:
Basic Education
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

## 5. GOVERNMENT'S PERSPECTIVE

(but excludes the movement to a TVET college)

As the biggest and primary stakeholder in the education sector, the DBE defines dropout as an *"undesirable departure from the schooling system"*.[17]

During a presentation to Parliament in 2024, the DBE noted that school dropout is difficult to measure as the throughput of learners from school to tertiary education is not tracked. The DBE is, however, working with the Department of Higher Education and Training to address this.

The DBE also acknowledges that COVID-19 and delays in processing and analysing administrative school attendance data on the South African Schools Administration Management System (SA-SAMS) impacted reporting.

The presentation suggests that while the successful completion of Grade 12 must be encouraged, "it should be remembered that South Africa is not unusual among developing countries." Suggestions to decrease the dropout rate include improved levels of learning and teaching (cited as the main lever to keep more learners in schools), a credible General Education Certificate after Grade 9 to "avoid duplication of youths" studying for a National Senior Certificate and then an additional NQF4 qualification at a TVET college."

Representatives from the DBE have suggested that the data monitoring system Learner Unit Record Information and Tracking System (LURITS) be strengthened to produce "more local-level monitoring of dropout hotspots," particularly for those aged 15 and below. The DBE has flagged initiatives to improve learner prospects and these include a range of teaching and learning interventions, psychosocial support, tighter monitoring of school participation and gender-responsive initiatives.

# 6. PUBLIC PERCEPTION

It has been reported that the overall dropout rate in South Africa is around 40%. In this survey, the dropout rate varies across the clusters, and expectedly so:

- CLUSTER 1: 26%
- CLUSTER 2: 36%
- CLUSTER 3: 39%
- CLUSTER 4: 29%

OVERALL: 33%

CLUSTER 1 has the lowest level of dropout but is certainly not immune to it. It should however be noted that some may report on dropout numbers of friends, colleagues, other family members living in areas that may be more comparable to the other clusters. The 26% therefore does not imply within CLUSTER 1 exclusively.

Considering this view, the follow-up question asked why those people dropped out and the most common reason is pregnancy.

| | CLUSTER 1 | CLUSTER 2 | CLUSTER 3 | CLUSTER 4 | TOTAL |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| PREGNANCY | 43% | 48% | 37% | 36% | 41% |
| DRUG ABUSE | 12% | 27% | 28% | 24% | 24% |
| FINANCIAL STRUGGLES | 13% | 17% | 3% | 14% | 11% |
| PEER PRESSURE | 10% | 9% | 8% | 6% | 8% |
| GANGSTERISM | 1% | 11% | 8% | 5% | 7% |
| DID NOT COPE ACADEMICALLY | 7% | 5% | 6% | 9% | 7% |
| DO NOT LIKE SCHOOL | 4% | 6% | 3% | 5% | 5% |
| BULLYING | 7% | 5% | 6% | 0% | 5% |
| LACK OF PARENTAL GUIDANCE | 1% | 6% | 2% | 8% | 4% |
| CRIMINAL BEHAVIOUR | 4% | 3% | 5% | 1% | 3% |
| ILLNESS OR DEPRESSION | 7% | 2% | 2% | 2% | 3% |
| OTHER REASONS | 30% | 18% | 21% | 18% | 21% |
| DO NOT KNOW | 6% | 3% | 2% | 8% | 5% |
| BASE SIZE | 67 | 99 | 121 | 87 | 374 |

NOTE: Only those who are aware of people that dropped out answered this question.

It should be noted that other reasons for dropping out such as financial strains, drugs, criminal behaviour and so on may be under-reported. The reason for stating this is when the two sets of reasons are compared *(previous table and further down)*, there are more sensitive reasons mentioned for the personal circumstances than the broader awareness levels. It is therefore very likely that the overall dropout rate is around 40%. Other reasons include: Corruption or nepotism; went to work; moved in with a boyfriend or girlfriend; lack of teacher support; expelled, no hope for the future; alcohol abuse; substance abuse; and disobedience. Most of these reasons are associated with all clusters.

Participants were then asked if any of the children in the household have or are planning to drop out and how this made the family feel.

| | CLUSTER 1 | CLUSTER 2 | CLUSTER 3 | CLUSTER 4 | TOTAL |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| HAVE OR ARE PLANNING TO DROP OUT (OWN CHILDREN) | 4% | 8% | 14% | 14% | 10% |
| BASE SIZE | 285 | 298 | 323 | 316 | 1 222 |
| HAPPY OR SAD (THE LOWER THE SCORE, THE SADDER) | 29% | 38% | 44% | 39% | 40% |
| BASE SIZE | 12 | 24 | 52 | 44 | 121 |

NOTE: Only those who did or are planning to drop out answered the sentiment question.

Based on the families or households where dropping has occurred or is considered, the reasons are also multi-dimensional but again, pregnancy remains the top reason, particularly in CLUSTER 1.

| | CLUSTER 1 | CLUSTER 2 | CLUSTER 3 | CLUSTER 4 | TOTAL |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| PREGNANCY | 33% | 5% | 13% | 14% | 14% |
| DID NOT COPE ACADEMICALLY | 0% | 20% | 12% | 16% | 13% |
| BULLYING | 8% | 10% | 12% | 11% | 11% |
| FINANCIAL STRUGGLES | 25% | 20% | 2% | 7% | 9% |
| DRUG ABUSE | 0% | 0% | 8% | 16% | 9% |
| WENT TO WORK | 0% | 10% | 10% | 5% | 7% |
| ILLNESS OR DEPRESSION | 8% | 10% | 8% | 5% | 7% |
| PEER PRESSURE | 8% | 15% | 8% | 2% | 7% |
| DO NOT LIKE SCHOOL | 0% | 0% | 8% | 9% | 6% |
| LACK OF TEACHER SUPPORT | 0% | 0% | 10% | 2% | 5% |
| EXPELLED | 8% | 5% | 4% | 0% | 3% |
| OTHER | 8% | 5% | 8% | 14% | 9% |
| BASE SIZE | 12 | 24 | 52 | 44 | 128 |

NOTE: Only those that have or are planning to drop out answered this question.

# NEW LEGISLATION AND POLICIES

**As mentioned in this publication's introduction, the basic education sector has been predominantly governed by three key pieces of legislation developed and implemented 18 years ago – coincidentally, that is the same amount of time an entire generation should have completed their basic education.**

For almost three decades, the South African Schools Act of 1996 has governed South Africa's education sector. This legislation aimed to address past inequalities, establishing standards for school governance and funding while promoting high-quality education to develop talent and boost the economy.

Alongside the Children's Act of 2005, it provided unprecedented rights and protections to learners, particularly those from previously discriminated racial groups. The National Education Policy Act, also passed in 1996, empowered the Minister of Education to set sectoral policies and determine educators' salaries and working conditions.

The DBE has undertaken various initiatives to address new developments within the sector, the nation, and the world at large. Of these initiatives, the BELA Act is the boldest and most comprehensive education revision in 30 years and intends to strengthen governance in South Africa's education sector.

- [x] Basic Education Laws Amendment (BELA) Act of 2024
- [x] The General Education Certificate (GEC)

# BASIC EDUCATION LAWS AMENDMENT (BELA) ACT OF 2024

Why were the existing education-related laws amended and how does it affect school dropout? Discuss. 150 marks.

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The BELA Act amends sections of the South African Schools Act of 1996 and the Employment of Educators Act of 1998 to account for developments in the education landscape since the enactment of the original legislation.

To summarise, the BELA Act makes Grade R compulsory, criminalises parental negligence in school attendance, regulates homeschooling, addresses language policies in schools, accommodates religion in a school's code of conduct and bans corporal punishment. Criticism has mounted from opposition parties and private interest groups who believe the role of school governing bodies will be undermined.

The BELA Act's provisions to address and reduce the dropout crisis in South Africa, Clauses 2 and 3, are insufficient and potentially problematic. Clause 2 amends section 3(1) of the South African Schools Act to make school attendance compulsory from Grade R at age six and no longer only from Grade 1. Now that the responsibility of early childhood development (ECD) lies with the DBE instead of the Department of Social Development, thanks to a function shift within government, there are encouraging changes to ensure children enter the education system earlier with standardised tracking as they progress through the education system.

NB!

Clause 2 however also increases the penalty provision in section 3(6) from six to 12 months. This penalty is problematic as several factors, such as a lack of finances, transport, state bureaucracy, and even threats of violence, prevent learners in South Africa from attending school. Implementing criminal penalties for non-attendance without addressing other education-related challenges would not prevent dropout. Indeed, criminalising parents already struggling to ensure their children's education will undermine their ability to provide and perpetuate cycles of poverty and disengagement.

Clause 3 places new obligations on educators, principals, and school governing bodies to track absenteeism to prevent dropout. However, it does not consider relevant research about the factors driving learner disengagement and dropout. It also presumes existing datasets on learner attendance and school dropout rates are accurate and complete. Clause 3 currently requires teachers to report extended 'unexcused absences' to their principal, who in turn should investigate and report their findings to the school's governing body.

*This is a potentially lengthy process that does not take into consideration that reintegrating learners who have already disengaged from school is far more difficult than retaining them through preventative interventions such as early warning systems.* ✳

- To rectify this, Zero Dropout Campaign made the following recommendations during the National Assembly's public participation process:

  1. Dropout prevention must be tracked against key performance indicators (KPIs) for provincial departments and the Minister of Basic Education.
  2. Data monitoring for dropout prevention should be institutionalised in the DBE by defining and tracking a set of indicators, including, but not limited to, learner attendance.
  3. These KPIs should be reflected in the government's Medium-Term Strategic Framework (MTSF) to ensure comprehensive adherence and accountability.
  4. Intergovernmental committees at provincial and national levels to monitor and respond to learner dropout trends and ensure accountability.
  5. Substantial considerations for psychosocial support at school level, particularly as a fundamental resource in quintile 1-3 public schools.
  6. Early Warning Systems (EWS) to mitigate learner disengagement and dropout.
  7. Data administration posts, relevant training, and infrastructure for data collection.

  Not all of these recommendations were incorporated into the Act but Zero Dropout Campaign believes that future regulations and interventions can still achieve some of these recommendations' aims by continuing to work with the DBE and other key stakeholders.

Following the passing of the BELA Act, people were surveyed on their experience of the legislation's passing and whether they were concerned about its potential impact on the education sector.

| | CLUSTER 1 | CLUSTER 2 | CLUSTER 3 | CLUSTER 4 | TOTAL |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| AWARE OF THE LEGISLATION (BELA BILL) | 17% | 13% | 13% | 19% | 15% |
| BASE SIZE | 266 | 287 | 312 | 295 | 1 160 |

How did people find out about the new legislation?

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| AT SCHOOL | 18% | 23% | 25% | 38% | 27% |
| TELEVISION | 38% | 14% | 25% | 17% | 24% |
| NEWS, MEDIA, WEBSITES | 31% | 26% | 18% | 13% | 21% |
| SOCIAL MEDIA | 13% | 20% | 13% | 25% | 18% |
| WORD OF MOUTH | 18% | 9% | 15% | 15% | 14% |
| COLLEAGUE, PRINCIPAL, DBE | 11% | 17% | 5% | 4% | 9% |
| RADIO | 16% | 3% | 5% | 6% | 8% |
| OTHER | 4% | 6% | 5% | 9% | 6% |

Do people have concerns about the new legislation?

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| NO CONCERNS | 59% | 56% | 75% | 44% | 58% |
| HAVE CONCERNS | 20% | 22% | 20% | 46% | 29% |
| OTHER REASONS | 34% | 38% | 13% | 15% | 24% |

Participated in information sessions or public hearings?

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| YES, PARTICIPATED | 2% | 6% | 7% | 8% | 6% |
| BASE SIZE | 45 | 35 | 41 | 53 | 174 |

With 15% awareness and of those that are aware, only 6% participated in public hearings. The majority of those that are aware have no concerns (58%). The percentage is fairly high across the clusters with Cluster 3 being the most optimistic about the new legislation.

# THE GENERAL EDUCATION CERTIFICATE (GEC)

INCOMPLETE

What is the General Education Certificate (GEC) and how does it affect school dropout?

Discuss. 150 marks.

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The new General Education Certificate (GEC) will be a standardised qualification for pupils completing Grade 9. Learners will be presented with a report card and a certificate that shows their skills, talents and competencies to assist their transition from school to work.

Before the GEC, the National Certificate (Vocational), which is set at NQF Level 4, was awarded to those finishing Grade 9 and allowed them to proceed to a TVET college. The DBE's motivation for including the GEC is that pupils who are more suitable for technical and vocational studies can obtain a certificate to that effect when applying for employment or further education.

Research shows that the transition from school to work can be a difficult period for many young people — and it's not linear. This period is often characterised by spells of unemployment and temporary work contracts. There were estimated to be about 5 million 15-19 year-olds who were neither employed, nor in education or training (NEET) across all Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries in 2015, equivalent to 6% of the population of that age. Being NEET is not only difficult for those who are in that situation, but it also implies that the skills acquired during education are not used and might deteriorate over time if they are not put to use in further education or employment. Young people who leave school need a range of skills to be successful and fulfil their potential.

One way of ensuring that more skills are learnt is attaining upper secondary education. Research shows that young people who are still in education have higher literacy and numeracy skills. The difference in skills between those who are in education and those who are not is equivalent to about 2.5 additional years of education.[18]

The GEC Assessment Model has been approved in South Africa. There is not enough evidence to determine whether such an early leaving certificate will have tangible economic benefits.

Critics have said that there is no evidence that the GEC serves as an employment pathway. While the DBE noted that obtaining this certificate could in fact encourage pupils to continue their primary education beyond Grade 9.[19] There is also no proof of that.

The GEC may mask the number and root causes of pupils dropping out of school in the first place. *

- In our research publication, "School Dropout: The Pandemic Edition", we outlined the limited prospects young people who do not obtain their national senior certificate have access to. Without a matric certificate or an NQF4 equivalent, young people generally cannot access tertiary education, which is their most likely route to employment and higher income.

  Completing Grade 9 is enough to enter a TVET college, complete an NQF4 qualification, and then pursue a tertiary education (NQF levels 5-7). Yet, only 1% of learners who drop out of school before matric hold a non-school certificate or diploma issued, for instance, by a TVET college. This is partly because TVET colleges are more likely to select Grade 12 graduates who stand a greater chance of graduating.

  On average, TVET colleges receive about half the number of enrolments as public universities. But, the evidence is clear: any post-school qualification significantly improves young people's job prospects.

When surveyed, only 16% of interviewees were aware of the GEC and that a pilot was being conducted by the DBE.

| | CLUSTER 1 | CLUSTER 2 | CLUSTER 3 | CLUSTER 4 | TOTAL |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| AWARE OF THE PILOT | 18% | 15% | 13% | 18% | 16% |
| BASE SIZE | 268 | 287 | 316 | 297 | 1 168 |

How did people find out about the GEC?

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| AT SCHOOL | 20% | 45% | 32% | 27% | 30% |
| TELEVISION | 30% | 15% | 21% | 24% | 23% |
| WORD OF MOUTH | 27% | 12% | 18% | 22% | 21% |
| NEWS, MEDIA, WEBSITES | 23% | 9% | 15% | 13% | 15% |
| SOCIAL MEDIA | 5% | 9% | 6% | 11% | 8% |
| RADIO | 7% | 9% | 12% | 4% | 8% |
| COLLEAGUE, PRINCIPAL, DOE | 9% | 0% | 9% | 4% | 6% |
| OTHER | 2% | 3% | 0% | 0% | 1% |
| BASE SIZE | 44 | 33 | 34 | 45 | 156 |

NOTE: Some stated that they knew about the pilot but could not recall from where.

*At an overall level, it is somewhat alarming at how many people support the idea.*

CLUSTERS 2, 3 and 4 are most at risk of the new policy and may, as cited in the feedback, create other problems in these communities where circumstances are already challenging.

The BELA Act and the GEC are well-intended and deserving of support. However, adequately addressing and reducing South Africa's learner dropout rate requires a multifaceted approach featuring various policies and initiatives implemented at all levels of government.

All participants were asked (whether they knew about the GEC pilot or not) if it were something they would consider and what would be the reasons for that.

| | CLUSTER 1 | CLUSTER 2 | CLUSTER 3 | CLUSTER 4 | TOTAL |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| BE OF INTEREST TO YOU OR YOUR CHILDREN - YES | 30% | 43% | 55% | 54% | 45% |
| BASE SIZE | 268 | 287 | 316 | 297 | 1 168 |

What are the reasons for saying that? (both those that answered "Yes" and "No")

Those that support the idea:

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| No concerns, good idea | 47% | 42% | 58% | 52% | 50% |
| Not everyone is academically inclined | 4% | 5% | 6% | 3% | 4% |
| One will have a certificate | 1% | 6% | 2% | 0% | 2% |
| One can then study for a trade, go to a TVET college | 3% | 2% | 0% | 2% | 2% |
| Will motivate learners | 1% | 2% | 3% | 0% | 2% |
| One can start working sooner, find a job easier, skilled to have an income | 1% | 2% | 3% | 1% | 2% |
| Not everyone can reach Grade 12, issues beyond their control | 1% | 1% | 3% | 1% | 1% |

Those against the idea:

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Have concerns | 16% | 13% | 14% | 18% | 15% |
| Children must have matric, I want my matric | 15% | 12% | 7% | 9% | 11% |
| A bad idea, will not be positive, will not help, do not like it | 11% | 10% | 10% | 12% | 11% |
| Will create more unemployment, struggle to find a job with Gr9, will create social issues | 6% | 11% | 7% | 10% | 9% |
| Learners will have no encouragement to go beyond Gr9, will encourage drop outs | 8% | 9% | 6% | 5% | 7% |
| Grade 9 is very low standard of qualification | 4% | 4% | 3% | 5% | 4% |
| Mind not developed at that age, too young, do not know what they want | 3% | 3% | 2% | 3% | 3% |
| Better jobs with matric | 2% | 1% | 1% | 2% | 1% |
| Must go to university, will not be able to go to university or be a professional | 1% | 1% | 0% | 1% | 1% |
| Other | 2% | 3% | 1% | 4% | 2% |
| BASE SIZE | 248 | 278 | 270 | 274 | 1 070 |

# GLOBAL CONTEXT AND PRACTICES

**School dropout is not a uniquely South African challenge, and often aspects such as the throughput rate and targets have been compared to some of its counterparts in the developing world. However, these comparisons are unfortunately done by officials to downplay the lack of progress as opposed to adapting relevant interventions and solutions.**

Despite progress over the decades, 250 million children and young people worldwide remain out of school, an increase of six million since 2021.

The global cost of school dropout is USD 10 billion a year by 2030, more than France and Japan's combined annual GDPs.[20] UNESCO's Director-General, Audrey Azoulay, has called on member states to break the "vicious circle of school dropouts as quickly as possible." Education is indeed a universal human right; this was reaffirmed in 2015 when the United Nations included access to quality education for all as a Sustainable Development Goal (SDG4). This chapter thus provides insights into how several developing countries have tried to address their school dropout challenges within the global context. Replicable programmes and policies are considered.

Sub-Saharan Africa has the highest rate of out-of-school youth in the world, accounting for about 30%. In 2021, it was estimated that 98 million children in the region were not in school, marking an increase of 20 million since 2009. This means that over one-fifth of primary-age children are out of school, and almost 60% of youth between the ages of 15 and 17 are not in school.[21] Researchers and advocates have thus urged governments to implement contextually relevant policies and interventions to address school dropouts in the region.

Many countries in Sub-Saharan Africa are faced with intersecting challenges that include poverty, gender biases, inequality, economic collapse and the effects of climate change. These all play a role in children dropping out of school and must be considered in educational policy development and implementation.

# A GLOBAL CRISIS

What common factors are associated with school dropout, globally?

(50 marks)

---

Research over 20 years has shown that youth who drop out of school early will likely earn less and experience more social and economic challenges than their peers with more years of completed education.[22] Apart from the financial implications of prematurely dropping out of school, there are considerable social impacts.

New data compiled by the Global Education Monitoring Report and the UNESCO Institute for Statistics reveals that the increase in out-of-school children since 2021 can be attributed to the mass exclusion of girls and young women from attending school in Afghanistan but also to the "continuing stagnation in education progress across the world".[23] About 122 million out-of-school children (48%) are girls and young women.[24]

No doubt, the realisation of SDG4, which aims to ensure inclusive, equitable, quality education for all, is severely hampered. Progress towards meeting SDG4 has been uneven, with significant disparities across geographies, gender, and age. Only one in six countries can achieve universal and quality educational access by 2030. UNESCO notes that even if countries deliver on the targets, 84 million children are still at risk of being out of school by 2030.[25]

Globally, a few common factors are associated with school dropout, although more recent cross-country research is needed.[26] Factors include poor health, malnutrition, motivation, child labour, poverty, pregnancy, teacher absenteeism, school location and poor quality educational provision. "Therefore, both demand and supply-driven factors are embedded in cultural and contextual realities, which make each circumstance different."[27]

On the following pages, outline the case findings for:

1. Guatemala
2. Pakistan
3. Serbia
4. Zimbabwe

(300 marks)

# GUATEMALA

Population: 17.6 million
Capital: Guatamala City
Official language: Spanish
Continent: ~~South America~~ Central America

Guatemala is a middle-income country in Central America with nearly 40% of Grade 6 students dropping out of school. An EWS pilot trial, named National Strategy for Successful Transition (ENTRE), was conducted to identify at-risk students accurately and to assess what targeted interventions positively reduce dropout. The pilot programme was implemented in 17% of Guatemala's primary schools (4,000 schools) and mostly used existing government resources. The results showed that the dropout rate in the transition from primary to lower secondary school decreased by 4% among schools assigned to use the programme and 9% among existing programme users. "Although the effect size is relatively modest, the low cost of the programme (estimated at less than USD 3 per student) and successful implementation at scale make this a promising and cost-effective approach for reducing dropout in resource-constrained contexts like Guatemala."Guatemala adapted its EWS based on the United States of America's system in 30 states and the European Union. ENTRE combined three key components: a brief training on actionable, evidence-based strategies to support students in staying in school, information on sixth-grade students at high risk of dropping out, and small behavioural nudges to help principals and teachers keep dropout prevention top-of-mind.

Critically, developing reliable education management information systems to bolster data and build early warning systems was noted. However, there is little evidence on whether and how such systems can effectively reduce dropout rates in countries with limited capacity to respond to students' needs.

The ENTRE programme used recently developed data systems in Guatemala to identify at-risk students and to activate preventative, evidence-based measures at the school level. The main factors determining dropout included a lack of knowledge among primary school actors about the effective measures to help students stay in school, a lack of knowledge among the same actors about which students were at risk of dropping out, and a lack of the prioritisation of preventing dropout among many competing responsibilities.

The ENTRE programme revealed that school principals and teachers should have a basic knowledge of effective dropout prevention strategies, identify at-risk students, and implement interventions promptly. When schools 'complied' with this, an EWS system could reduce dropout rates by 31.1 percentage points, with a cost-benefit ratio of about USD 19 per each USD invested.

Afghanistan

Pakistan

Lahore

Karachi

RAJASTHAN

GUJARAT

Ahmedabad

# PAKISTAN

Population: 240.5 million
Capital: Islamabad
Official language: Urdu / English
Continent: Asia

About 21.7 million children aged 5-16 are out of school in Pakistan. This is despite robust policies and study findings pointing to how children can remain in school. Factors that positively affect educational attainment in Pakistan include reduced child work, the absence of violence, decision-making power, parent's education, reduced travel time to school, and improved economic conditions.[28] The enabling environment at home and school is also important, along with the active involvement of parents in schooling. The Punjab Child Labour Survey also shows that school dropout is higher in rural areas but tends to get higher in urban areas where poverty and child labour are present.[29] Poverty needs to be addressed.

In June 2024, the World Bank approved the USD 150 million project *Getting Results: Access and Delivery of Quality Education Services in Punjab (GRADES)* to benefit about five million children, 7,000 principals, 165,000 teachers and 3,000 teacher mentors in public schools across the province.[30] GRADES aims to increase participation rates in pre-primary and primary grades, enhance reading proficiency, and reduce dropouts. GRADES focuses on improving learning outcomes, recovering from the effects of COVID-19, strengthening school management and expanding school participation levels.

Other school dropout prevention interventions include a government cash-transfer scheme known as the Ehsaas Education Stipends (EES) programme for primary, secondary, and higher education students. The project offers incentives to parents to send their children to school. The programme focuses specifically on girls' education by providing them a higher stipend as their dropout rate increases after Grade 5.[31]

South African possibility?

Pakistan implemented a similar stipend programme—Waseela-e-Taleem—in 2012. However, this was beset with challenges, and the EES has been refined. Now, there is a fully biometric payment system, and the government has memorandums of understanding with all provinces to ensure its implementation in 160 districts.

Meanwhile, the Sindh Technical Assistance for Development through Enhanced Education Programme (STA DEEP) implemented in 2021 aims to help the education department build more responsive educational systems.[32] The chief component is mobile monitoring of 40,000 schools and 120,000 teachers across Sindh. The Sindh School Monitoring System indicators include teachers' and students' attendance, textbook availability, weekly lesson plans prepared by teachers, and functionality of school infrastructure — washrooms, availability of drinking water and electricity, and school building conditions. These have been flagged as contributing factors to school dropout rates. All data is transferred to a dashboard that monitoring and evaluation officials can access.

Dunaújváros
Kaposvár
Pécs
Osijek
Slavonski Brod
Нови Сад
Šabac
Шабац
Belgrade
Београд
Tuzla
Zenica
Sarajevo
Mostar
Serbia
Čačak
Чачак
Jagodina
Јагодина
Kruševac
Крушевац
Niš
Ниш
Novi Pazar
Нови Пазар
Montenegro
Kosovo
Podgorica
Подгорица
Budva
Будва
Shkodër
Durrës
Tiranë
Albania
Ohrid
Охрид
Skopje
Скопје
North Macedonia
Vranje
Врање
Leskovac
Лесковац
Pernik
Перник
Sofia
София
Vidin
Видин
Vratsa
Враца
Blagoevgrad
Благоевград
Pazardzhik
Serres
Σέρρες
Drobeta-Turnu Severin
Târgu Jiu
Craiova
Alba Iulia
Sibiu
Turda
Cluj-Napo
E73
E70
E75
E851

# SERBIA

Population: 6.618 million
Capital: Belgrade
Official language: Serbian
Continent: Europe

Individualised dropout prevention programmes received attention in Serbia through the Individual Dropout Prevention Plan (IDPP) developed for students already identified at high risk of dropping out of school. Students who had a history of absenteeism and grade repetition were particularly flagged as high risk. In addition, students in poorer schools who less qualified teachers taught were also at risk. These students completed a questionnaire (administered by a school psychologist) on their perceptions of how highly teachers accepted them and of overall well-being at school. Homeroom teachers organised meetings with students at risk of dropping out and their parents to better understand their situation and discuss ways forward. The School Dropout Prevention Team then analysed information to inform the development of a Student Dropout Prevention Plan.[33]

Each plan included customised individual interventions to help the students stay in school, and it was monitored throughout the school year. Schools showed creativity in their intervention efforts, which included engaging students in peer tutoring, organising fundraising activities, connecting at-risk students with local NGOs and community associations, collaborating with local authorities and social service centres to help families access housing and social assistance, conducting remedial classes for underperforming students, and enhancing communication and dialogue with students and their parents.[33]

The pilot implementation of individualised support measures in ten pilot schools in Serbia's seven most vulnerable municipalities was assessed in 2017, two years after its inception. Of the 450 students for whom individualised plans were developed, 25 dropped out. This has demonstrated the effectiveness of such measures. The research reveals that individualised support measures result in significant changes in three out of four outcome indicators for all students at the school level. The dropout rate, absenteeism, and grade repetition decreased (by 66%, 30%, and 23%, respectively).[34]

These results are very encouraging since they demonstrate how systemic and carefully planned efforts at school level (adjusted to students' needs) can help combat even the most persistent risk factors (such as poverty) and prevent dropout in a significantly large number of cases.

Serbia is considered a middle-income country, with potential candidacy for the European Union. Hence, individualised measures may not be possible in other contexts. Nevertheless, the emphasis is also on resourcefulness and creativity when faced with school dropout.

Kasungu
Malawi
Chipata
Lilongwe
Tete
Chinhoyi
Katima Mulilo
Kasane
Livingstone
Norton
Harare
Hwange
Kadoma
Hwange
National Park
Zimbabwe
Mutare
Chimoio
Gweru
Bulawayo
Masvingo
Francistown
Polokwane
Kruger
National Park
Gaborone
Mbombela
Pretoria

# ZIMBABWE

Population: 16.67 million
Capital: Harare
Official language: Shona, English, Tshwa language +Ndebele
Continent: Africa

In Zimbabwe, approximately 22,000 girls drop out of school each year owing to pregnancy.[35] While policies enable teen mothers to re-enter school, girls rarely return owing to stigmatisation from peers and teachers and increased financial and social responsibilities. ✓

The EWS developed by Bantwana aimed to identify adolescents (particularly girls) at risk of dropping out of school and to provide the necessary support to keep them in school.[36] The EWS was piloted in 20 secondary schools in Zimbabwe. Teachers were trained to use a simple two-page paper-based early warning tool drawing on the ABC risk indicators for school dropout (absenteeism, behaviour, course failure).

Bantwana partnered with the ministries of education, public service, labour and social welfare, as well as school administrators and community care workers to adapt the tool and set up task forces. These task force teams met monthly and comprised guidance teachers, principals, teachers, community care workers and students. Taskforce members link identified girls to community care workers and psychosocial services through the National Case Management System (NCMS), and action plans were developed for each at-risk girl.[37] ✓

In Zimbabwe, this early warning system proved scalable. The government adopted the process and integrated it into the NCMS, which is managed by the Department of Social Welfare and the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education.

It would be interesting to look at parallels with South Africa and how similair interventions could be adopted.

Komatipoort
Elandshoek
Mbombela
Matsulu
Ngodwana
Barberton Nature Reserve
Songimvelo Nature Reserve
MR20
MR1
Protected Landscape
Simunye
Goba
MR3
MR7
N200
Ngwenya
Dundonald-A
Empuluzi
Mbabane
MR3
MR5
Mafutseni
Mpaka
Siteki
Etikhulungwane
Lobamba
Manzini
Bhunya
Malkerns
Eswatini
eMvelo
MR4
Mankayane
MR16
Siphofaneni
Big Bend
MR9
Sicunusa
MR13
MR14
Manyiseni
Ndumu
Gege
Hlatikulu
Mkhondo
MR10
Nsoko
Oshabeni
Lulwane
Trust
Nhlangano
MR12
Ingwavuma
MR11
Bhekindoda
Madonela
Belgrade
MR21
MR11
Luneburg
oGodlwayo
Lavumisa
Nondabuya
Pongola
Klipspruit
Paulpietersburg
Klipwal
Jozini
Ntshongw
Ithala Game Reserve
Magudu
Ophansi
eMkhuze

# ESWATINI

Population: 1.211 million
Capital: Mbabane, Lobamba
Official language: Swati, English
Continent: Africa

In Eswatini, only 13% of young people complete secondary school. While 90% start their secondary school journeys, only 47% of girls will finish school.[viii] A quarter of the girls are believed to have given birth before the age of 18, and 29% self-report dropping out of school because of pregnancy. Eswatini also has the highest HIV prevalence rate in the world, rising to 31% for women.[38]

Bantwana's EWS — the Go Girls Connect Programme — was a mobile app that enabled girls to self-identify as at risk of dropping out or as victims of gender-based violence. Based on these assessment outcomes, girls were linked to pathways of care in schools and community programmes.

Go Girls Connect is grounded in the 'ABCs' of risky behaviour: absenteeism, behaviour, and course failure. Adapted from Creative International's evidence-based model, the EWS identifies girls vulnerable to dropout and provides a response protocol to retain them in school. The response protocol includes student assessment and counselling, the development of an Academic Support Action Plan (ASAP!), and referrals to health and social services as needed.

Two EWS programmes were piloted: a teacher-administered EWS tool and a student-self-administered tool. The teacher-administered EWS tool identified 36 adolescent girls as at risk of dropping out of school. The student self-administered EWS tool identified 175 adolescent girls (34%) as at risk of dropping out of school. The teachers' assessment focused on financial risk factors (girls who had outstanding fees and balances), whereas the girls' self-assessments better tapped into the three risk factors of absenteeism, behaviour, and coursework.[39]

The results indicate that teachers may not be as likely to recognise girls who are at risk of dropping out of school due to reasons other than financial needs. It is important to provide more comprehensive training to help teachers identify early warning signs. The EWS shows promise in identifying and keeping girls in school. Bantwana is currently in talks with the Ministry of Education and Training to promote widespread adoption and has secured additional funding to test a digital version of the EWS self-assessment tool, which will be directly accessible to girls via mobile phones.

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In summary, what works and can be deemed international best practice to prevent School Dropout?

- [x] Real-time learner tracking with integrated Early Warning Systems
- [x] Access to Psychosocial Support Services (PSS)
- [x] Accelerated Learning Programmes for literacy and numeracy

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# REDUCING DROPOUT

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South Africa's school dropout rate has decreased to four in ten since the end of Apartheid and its education policies. What policy changes and interventions can still be implemented to accelerate this progress and meet the Zero Dropout Campaign's call to reduce it to two in ten by 2030 and the DBE's ambition to reduce it to less than one in ten by 2050?

Discuss. 300 marks

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# #1 DATA FOR ACTION: EARLY WARNING SYSTEMS

We have learnt that only part of what is happening in schools is known. Dropout information is recorded in the South African Schools Administration and Management System (SA-SAMS). The SA-SAMS was implemented in 2004, adopted by the DBE in 2007, and now operates in 85% of South African schools at no cost to them.

The system produces 'aggregate' and generalised information and, therefore cannot identify which particular children are at risk of dropping out. Moreover, the system is not online, which means there may be duplicated records, and the records cannot be validated nationally.

Learner-level information, on the other hand, flags young people who may drop out of school. We need more detailed and regular data. Collecting the 'correct' types of insights over time allows us to respond appropriately to the needs of the education system, design better policies and programmes, and track our progress. Collecting missing individual learner records also allows us to track learners over time.

For the first time in 2023, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) included Throughput Indicators in its National Senior Certificate Exam Results Technical Report. Zero Dropout Campaign recommends that the DBE includes more granular data, which can be achieved through information received from a DDD dropout tool.

The New Leaders Foundation developed the Data-Driven Districts (DDD) programme. The DDD uses data aggregation and analytics to provide quality insights to education officials to improve learner outcomes. The programme's online dashboard (in response to the SA-SAMS offline functionality) covers 24,000 schools in South Africa. Education officials can pinpoint the schools and learners needing specific support and then intervene when necessary.

Zero Dropout Campaign supported schools to integrate the DDD into their administrative tasks, while advocating for robust and granular-level EWS in schools. An EWS toolkit needs to comprise the ABCs of good indicators:

- ✓ **ACADEMIC RESULTS**
- ✓ **BEHAVIOUR PROBLEMS**
- ✓ **CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM**

Zero Dropout Campaign believes that better school dropout tracking systems can tell us a much bigger story about the reasons for learners dropping out of school. We need to understand their lived realities, find patterns across schools and districts, use the data to develop targeted programmes and interventions, and start predicting who is at risk of dropping out of school.

## What we learnt about absenteeism tracking at schools:

1. It's possible to build school-based support teams and to show them how to adopt a non-punitive and caring approach to absenteeism, which takes the many causal factors into account and allows the best interests of the learner to be considered in finding a solution;
2. Follow-up visits and the building of ongoing relationships with learners and their families are important as issues are seldom solved overnight;
3. It's crucial to build a good relationship with the teachers so as to build an efficient referral system;
4. Where NPO personnel are conducting tracking and follow-ups of absent learners, it's important to use persons who are respected by communities and families and can assist them in addressing complex socio-economic and psychological issues;
5. Build a good relationship with the school's leadership and administration teams so as to access school data and assist closely where needed.

Adopt-a-School
FOUNDATION

# #2 PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT

*Over the years and backed by research, Zero Dropout Campaign has determined that school dropout does not occur in a vacuum and isn't usually an impulsive decision. Some learners manage to stay in school and perform well despite facing tough circumstances.*

Researchers have observed that these resilient youth often succeed because they have 'personal anchors' – stable, positive emotional relationships with at least one parent or key person. Zero Dropout Campaign's ample case studies show that community members, teachers, parents, or caregivers can be this anchor in a learner's life. It requires persistence, a consistent presence, and an open heart to build a trusting relationship.

Many at-risk children grow up in environments in which they lack the support of a caring adult. Teachers often play this role in many communities, but they simply cannot attend to the needs of all their learners because of their heavy workloads and the realities of the schooling system.

Moreover, there are 23,000 learners for every one school social worker. Meanwhile, 9,000 social workers are unemployed in South Africa (2022 statistics). Despite the DBE's implementation of learner support agents, there is a chronic backlog in responding to referral cases from one week to three months.

Zero Dropout Campaign partnered with four implementing agents in the Western Cape, KwaZulu-Natal, and Eastern Cape to build a larger ecosystem of psychosocial support.

These approaches are underpinned by the critical elements of role modelling, mentoring, life skills development, social and spiritual guidance, and a referral system to access professional and state services. In Zero Dropout Campaign's Toolkit on School Dropout Prevention, particular resources helped with:

- ✓ **DEVELOPING A FUNCTIONAL SCHOOL-BASED SUPPORT TEAM**
- ✓ **MAPPING A REFERRAL SYSTEM IN THE COMMUNITY AND LEARNING HOW TO REFER LEARNERS**
- ✓ **USING AND DEVELOPING THE LEARNER SUPPORT AGENT AND THE CHILD AND YOUTHCARE WORKER**
- ✓ **TRACKING INTERVENTION SUCCESS.**

The interactive toolkit is aimed at public primary and secondary schools in South Africa. It can be used by a range of stakeholders to help schools and their surrounding community understand and address dropout holistically and effectively.

# #3 ACCELERATED LEARNING PROGRAMMES: CATCHING AND KEEPING UP

Accelerated learning programmes (ALPs) aim to address gaps in learning resulting from children having been out of school for extended periods of time. ALPs are centred on meeting core learning competencies at an accelerated pace, and on increasing equity in education by reducing the gap between learners who have been out of school for extended periods and those who have had consistent access to education.

Successful ALPs complement the school curriculum but often use alternative teaching methods and are directed at specific gaps in learning. Typically, children are taught in a collaborative learner-centred teaching environment, in their home language with a condensed curriculum focused on literacy and numeracy skills.

In 2019, Zero Dropout Campaign launched its first accelerated learning catch-up programme: Reading for Meaning. We invested heavily in accelerated learning. Why does it matter? Being able to read means connecting, relating, and finding one's way through a densely coded world. Making sense of a text allows a child to learn more across subjects. Being engaged in these helps a learner remain in school and have faith that school is valuable and meaningful. They are also at less risk of repeating a grade. Evidence shows that grade repetition increases the likelihood of a child dropping out of school.

The Campaign's accelerated learning programmes, now expanded to include maths and three home languages, aim to address poor performance at an early age to equip learners with the foundational literacy and numeracy skills they require to remain motivated and on track to complete their schooling. We advocate for a Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) educational approach. This focuses on a child's learning needs rather than their age or grade.

The lessons learnt from the implementation of these programmes and the benefits indicate positive impact on learners and their foundational skills, and there are numerous reasons for advocating for TaRL in South Africa and the rest of the region:

- ✓ **TARL DOES NOT PROMOTE A ONE-SIZE-FITS-ALL APPROACH AND PROVIDES EDUCATORS THE AUTONOMY TO TAILOR TEACHING TO THEIR CONTEXTS.**
- ✓ **TARL PROVIDES A MEANS OF NARROWING THE WIDE RANGE OF LEARNING LEVELS IN INDIVIDUAL CLASSROOMS WHICH HAS RESULTED IN MULTI-GRADE CLASSROOMS.**
- ✓ **TARL HAS PROVEN A COST-EFFECTIVE PROGRAMME THAT DOES NOT REQUIRE EXTENSIVE RESOURCES.**
- ✓ **TARL CAN BE CONDUCTED IN LEARNERS' HOME LANGUAGE OR AN ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE, DEPENDING ON THE DIFFERENT NEEDS OF A SCHOOL AND ITS LEARNERS.**

*The full impact of TaRL at a large scale can only be achieved through a strong partnership with an education department. Zero Dropout Campaign supports the DBE's numerous learning and literacy interventions but has identified the need to reassess the traditional approach of teaching children according to their age or grade and allow schools to make time for TaRL programme implementation.*

# CONCLUSION

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What is clear from this report and the experiences of Zero Dropout Campaign over the past five years is that reducing learner dropout and meeting our goals as a campaign and the national targets set by the DBE, requires a broader coalition of stakeholders who are committed to increasing access to quality education.

Continue further. 2025-2030

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# THE CAMPAIGN AGAINST SCHOOL DROPOUT

Although at least 40% of all young people in South Africa drop out of school, there is no national task force focused on addressing this crisis. The vision of the Zero Dropout Campaign is to halve the rate of school dropout by 2030 – which requires a collaborative effort targeting a range of actions that can prevent and intervene in school dropout. Towards this end, the Zero Dropout Campaign pursues four strategies to ensure school dropout is firmly on the national agenda with a clear pathway for significant change:

- ✓ Driving a powerful public advocacy agenda focused on mobilising a range of actors to take action on school dropout;
- ✓ Developing an accelerated learning programme focused on the rapid catch-up of skills that enable reading for meaning to address underlying learning backlogs that contribute to learner dropout;
- ✓ Supporting the development and mobilisation of a network of schools committed to Zero Dropout; and
- ✓ Piloting innovative approaches to reducing dropout and learning from the implementation experience.

We believe that a co-ordinated response to school dropout must begin with accurate data tracking of individual learners, together with evidence-based interventions aimed at reducing learner risk and increasing learner engagement to prevent school dropout.

ZERO DROPOUT

**The Zero Dropout Campaign is working towards halving the rate of school dropout by 2030.**

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DGMT is a South African foundation built on endowments from Douglas George Murray and his wife, Eleanor. DGMT is committed to developing South Africa's potential through public innovation and strategic investment. Our goal for South Africa is a flourishing people, economy and society. Towards this end DGMT currently distributes about R160-million per year and leverages and manages a similar amount of funding through joint ventures with other investors.

ZERO DROP OUT

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