ZERO DROP OUT

SCHOOL DROPOUT

CONTEXT COUNTS / 2022

WHAT'S THE STORY?

In South Africa, four out of ten Grade 1 learners drop out of school before reaching matric. The national emphasis on the matric pass rate means that these learners' stories are still largely unheard. While public conversations about school dropout often depict the 'unmotivated learner' at a 'moment of crisis', learners who leave school have often been battling for years against the odds. In this publication, we draw on ethnographic research to make visible the everyday lives of learners, and their complex journey through school.

The publication paints a picture of daily life in two Northern Cape schools (serving Grades 7–12), where trends in school dropout mirror the national picture. Drawing on interviews, poetry and art-making, we describe the everyday obstacles and victories of learners in their own words as well as the stories of the teachers, families and communities that support them to stay in school. We focus particularly on the role of school culture, absenteeism tracking and psychosocial support in preventing dropout. This draws out both the challenges schools are facing and the innovative ways they are seeking to overcome them.

Through the stories in this publication, we see that learners' relationship with school is shaped by the difficulties and demands of their social lives, both inside and outside the school gates. While making their way through school, many young people are also trying to: uplift their families, avoid bullies, achieve social status, stay safe, catch up on missed learning and find a sense of belonging.

The social, political and economic conditions that young people must overcome to finish school can feel overwhelming, but all of us have a role to play in supporting learners and those who care for and teach them. In this pocket of the Northern Cape, as in many other parts of the country, there are extraordinary examples of what it means to take on this role in the face of great obstacles.

In writing this publication, we have changed the names of all the school staff, learners and community members we spoke to, as well as the two schools that are at the heart of our story. This is to protect the privacy of all those who voluntarily agreed to share their experiences with us.

ZERO DROPOUT

ACRONYMS AND DEFINITIONS /

ANC AFRICAN NATIONAL CONGRESS

CAP COMMUNITY ACTION PARTNERSHIP

CBO COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANISATION

CSR CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

DBE DEPARTMENT OF BASIC EDUCATION

DBST DISTRICT-BASED SUPPORT TEAM
The role of District-based Support Teams is to support teaching, learning and management, and in doing so, help build capacity in schools.

DDD DATA DRIVEN DISTRICTS DASHBOARD
The DDD programme is led by the Michael and Susan Dell Foundation in collaboration with the Department of Basic Education. Its aim is to support learners to stay, and succeed, in school by changing the way that data is collected and used in schools. Using up-to-date, accurate data, schools can offer the right support to learners at the right time, helping to prevent learner dropout.

EA EDUCATION ASSISTANTS
Since April 2020, Education Assistants have been appointed to schools as part of the Presidential Youth Employment Initiative. Their roles have included teaching and curriculum support; ICT information and communications technology support; facilitating after-school activities; acting as reading champions; and overseeing compliance with COVID-19 prevention measures. Meanwhile, General School Assistants served as janitors, sports and enrichment coaches, library assistants, or child and youth care workers.

EWS EARLY WARNING SYSTEM

FET FURTHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING

KDG KHULA DEVELOPMENT GROUP

LSA LEARNER SUPPORT AGENTS
Learner Support Agents aim to offer critical psychosocial support to learners in schools, from substance abuse prevention and career guidance to lay counselling. They have also been known to support School-based Support Teams with record-keeping and linkages to learners.

LSEN LEARNERS WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

MDO MASIBUMBANE DEVELOPMENT ORGANISATION

NACCW NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF CHILD CARE WORKERS

NGO NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATION

PfP PARTNERS FOR POSSIBILITY
PfP is the flagship project of Citizen Leadership Lab, a non-profit leadership development initiative. It aims to nurture conscious and resilient school principals by partnering them with business leaders. These partnerships not only support capacity and skills-building in schools, but also deepen their external support networks.

PYEI PRESIDENTIAL YOUTH EMPLOYMENT INITIATIVE
In April 2020, the PYEI implemented a Basic Education Employment Initiative in all nine provinces, which has posted as many as 320 000 young people as Education Assistants and General School Assistants into South African schools. This was intended to boost youth employment, while also supporting schools under COVID-19 lockdown conditions.

SA-SAMS SOUTH AFRICAN SCHOOL ADMINISTRATION AND MANAGEMENT SYSTEM
The SA-SAMS is a reporting and administration system provided for free to all schools and maintained by the DBE. It captures learner and parent information, governance, curriculum data and timetabling.

SBST SCHOOL-BASED SUPPORT TEAM
SBSTs are made up of representatives of school staff and are designed to identify and support learners who are struggling academically, physically, socially or psychologically, and therefore at risk of dropping out.

SGB SCHOOL GOVERNING BODY
A democratically elected group made up of parents/guardians, educators, learners and other school staff. Its duty is to make sure that the school is governed in the best interest of all these groups.

SMT SCHOOL MANAGEMENT TEAM
The SMT is made up of the senior leadership of a school, including the principal and head teachers.

Yethu Clubs *are community responses to dropout prevention, led by Champion Teachers, but involving parents, community members and local leaders. Together, they form part of a nationwide network of schools that is working to prevent dropout, supported by the Zero Dropout Campaign.*

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FOREWORD /

PAUL B CROMHOUT
Chief Executive Officer, Small Projects Foundation

In my experience working in low-resource communities for 34 years, I know that it's tempting to propose solutions to societal problems before investing time and resources to diagnose the underlying factors that drive people's behaviours and choices. We see this transpire in different spheres of society.

For instance, it is often assumed that young people who drop out of school are lazy and irresponsible teenagers who prefer getting 'high' with their friends over a good education. This assumption is not only wrong, it has moral implications for how we approach solving the problem. Researchers[1] have argued that it's easy to spot biases in other people, especially when we disagree with them, but it's much harder to recognise our own biases. These 'bias blind spots' can affect our decision-making, like how we attempt to address complex socio-economic problems.

When we approach multidimensional issues, like school dropout, from a place of curiosity and openness, we are better placed to design interventions that meet the needs and goals of the communities affected.

This is the approach of the Zero Dropout Campaign; this publication details how young people's socio-economic contexts, school culture and household dynamics intertwine in ways that support or constrain their learning and engagement with school. Through my work with the Small Projects Foundation, I have seen these dynamics play out time and again.

Our work in more than a hundred schools in urban and peri-urban parts of the Eastern Cape has shown us the importance of mentorship, psychosocial counselling and academic tutoring. We have also seen first-hand how the consistent monitoring of learner attendance can help teachers to identify those at risk of disengaging from school or dropping out. In addition, we find that many learners are progressing through our schooling system without fundamental literacy and numeracy skills, which is why they are struggling to keep up with the curriculum.

Available data tells us that four out of ten learners in South Africa who start school in Grade 1 will drop out before completing. Far too often, those without a matric qualification are unable to find a job. When we reflect on the far-reaching consequences of dropout, ignoring this problem inevitably means perpetuating intergenerational cycles of poverty.

We should be asking the right questions to get to the right solutions. It starts with asking how gender and social inequalities intersect to cause disengagement and dropout; why some children are more likely to leave school without a qualification than others; and how systemic failures are limiting young people's pathways to escaping the inequality trap.

South Africa's response to reducing school dropout must be borne out of a deep and informed engagement with the above-mentioned questions. We need a holistic approach to tackle this problem, requiring individual and collective agency. In social science, there is general consensus that agency refers to the capacity of individuals to act based on their power and resources.

In isolation, individual action may appear small and insignificant, but when taken together, the impact is exponential. For caregivers and communities, these steps include: reading at home with your child, showing interest in your child's schoolwork and ensuring that your child's school has up-to-date contact details to enable an open channel of communication.

To provide a future to these learners we need to take action now. Each parent, teacher, community member and school needs to identify potential and existing dropouts and use every effort to ensure they stay in, or return to, school. We call on education officials to make this a priority and recognise the issue as a personal and national crisis. %

It is often assumed that young people who drop out of school are lazy and irresponsible teenagers who prefer getting 'high' with their friends over a good education. This assumption is not only wrong, it has moral implications for how we approach solving the problem.

INTRODUCTION /

In South Africa, four out of ten Grade 1 learners drop out of school before reaching matric.[2] But the national emphasis on the Grade 12 pass rate means that these learners' stories are still largely unheard. While public conversations about school dropout often depict the 'unmotivated learner' at a 'moment of crisis', learners who leave school have usually been battling for years against the odds. In this publication, we draw on ethnographic research to make visible the everyday lives of learners, and their complex journey through school.

The vision of the Zero Dropout Campaign is to harness the power of collaboration, advocacy and evidence to halve the rate of school dropout by 2030. Each year, we release a publication showcasing the latest evidence and best practice in dropout prevention, highlighting the context-specific barriers to finishing school in South Africa.

In this year's issue, we paint a detailed picture of daily life in two Northern Cape schools (serving Grades 7–12), where trends in school dropout mirror the national picture. The two schools are located in different villages near Kuruman, in the Joe Morolong Local Municipality. The first, which we will call Kgoro Intermediate, serves Grades 7–9. Along with other primary schools in the region, it feeds graduating learners to our second case study school, which we will call Dithaba High. Dithaba is one of only a few high schools in the area, and caters for Grades 10–12. We have changed the names of villages and schools, as well as the learners, volunteers and school staff within them. Ethnographic research for this publication was undertaken by Dr Andrew Hartnack, a social anthropologist.

Drawing on interviews, participant observation, poetry and art-making, this publication describes the everyday obstacles and victories

of learners, as told in their own words, as well as the stories of the teachers, families and communities that support them to stay in school. While exploring the daily realities in and around these two schools, we also draw comparisons to other parts of South Africa, where the Zero Dropout Campaign has worked since 2017.

Dropout is not a once-off event. Learners' disengagement from school unfolds slowly, and often worsens over time. Young people can be 'pulled' from school by pressures at home or in their communities, or 'pushed' from school by their experiences of peers, teachers and classrooms. While this publication gives attention to the community and family dynamics that can pull learners out of school, it focuses particularly on the school environment, and the ways that school culture, absenteeism tracking and psychosocial support can help prevent learner dropout. We explore both the challenges these schools face and the innovative ways they seek to overcome them, thus drawing out lessons for dropout prevention efforts across the country.

Through the stories in this publication, we learn that young people's relationship with school is shaped by the difficulties and demands of their social lives, both inside and outside the school gates. While making their way through school, many learners are also trying to uplift their families, avoid bullies, achieve social status, stay safe, catch up on missed learning and find a sense of belonging.

The social, political and economic conditions that young people must overcome to finish school can feel overwhelming, but all of us have a role to play in supporting learners and those who care for and teach them. In this pocket of the Northern Cape, as in many other parts of the country, there are extraordinary examples of what it means to take on this role in the face of great obstacles.

THE ACTORS IN OUR STORY /

Groups

SCHOOLS	School Governing Body (SGB) · Staff · School-based Support Team (SBST)
LEARNERS	The Representative Council of Learners (RCL)
GOVERNMENT	DBE District Office · District-based Support Team (DBST)
COMMUNITY	The village committee · Yethu Club
CSR INITIATIVES	Partners for Possibility (PfP)
LOCAL ECONOMY	The mines · The taverns

People

SGB members

The teachers

The principals

Kgoro RCL representatives

DBE-appointed Education Assistants

Village committee members living near Dithaba

Champion Teachers

PfP business partner of Kgoro's principal

PfP business partner of Dithaba's principal

The 'polo drivers'

Tools

DDD Dashboard

South African School Administration and Management System

OUR STORY LOCATION /

On the fringes of the Kalahari Desert is a natural spring gushing 20-million litres of crystal-clear water every day. Known as the 'Eye of Kuruman', or *Ga-Segonyana* in the local Tswana language, this fountain brings life to the town of Kuruman, making it an oasis in its semi-arid surroundings.

The history of formal education in and around Kuruman stretches back to the mid-1800s when British missionaries built a mission station and a schoolroom, translating the Bible for the first time into an African language – Setswana. While missionary education was tied to evangelism and colonialism, it also gave rise to a generation of African intellectuals and liberation leaders, including Sol Plaatjie, a founding member of the African National Congress (ANC). Even with the resistance of these African intellectuals and other activists, by the mid-1900s Afrikaner nationalists had risen to power. They built on long-held colonial segregation to create 'apartheid': black South Africans were dispossessed of their land and removed to reserves, known as 'Bantustans'. One of these was the former Bophuthatswana, where our case study schools are located. The apartheid government did not believe that black people should receive an education beyond a level that would prepare them for menial and manual labour. Instead, the 'Bantustans' were designed as labour reserves, supplying migrant workers to white-controlled mines, industries and cities.

In 1953, the government passed the Bantu Education Act, which restricted resources and support going to schools in the Bantustans, and made sure the curriculum focused only on basic elements. Most of the mission schools were forced to shut down, either in protest of the Bantu Education Act or because they didn't have enough government funding to run.

Although the 'Bantustans' were abolished in 1994, apartheid has left powerful socio-economic and educational legacies in this region. Schools should be like an oasis in a desert, providing life-giving sustenance and hope to surrounding communities. But the under-resourced schools in this part of South Africa struggle to play this role effectively. Still, many of these schools hold stories of great resilience, commitment, talent and innovation, offering wider lessons for how South Africa might build schools, communities and

AN EYE ON

systems that help learners stay, and succeed, in school.

The history of poverty, overcrowding, migrant labour, illiteracy and neglect continue to shape the nature, and the rate, of school dropout in Kuruman, and the larger Joe Morolong Local Municipality, where it is located. But there are also newer economic and social dynamics at play. The district has rich deposits of manganese ore, which is in high demand globally to build electric car batteries and other manufactured products. The areas around Kuruman are now at the start of a mining boom, with new mine owners arriving to take advantage of the opportunities. Road infrastructure is beginning to buckle because of the high volumes of heavy vehicles carrying manganese iron and ore from the semi-desert to the coast.

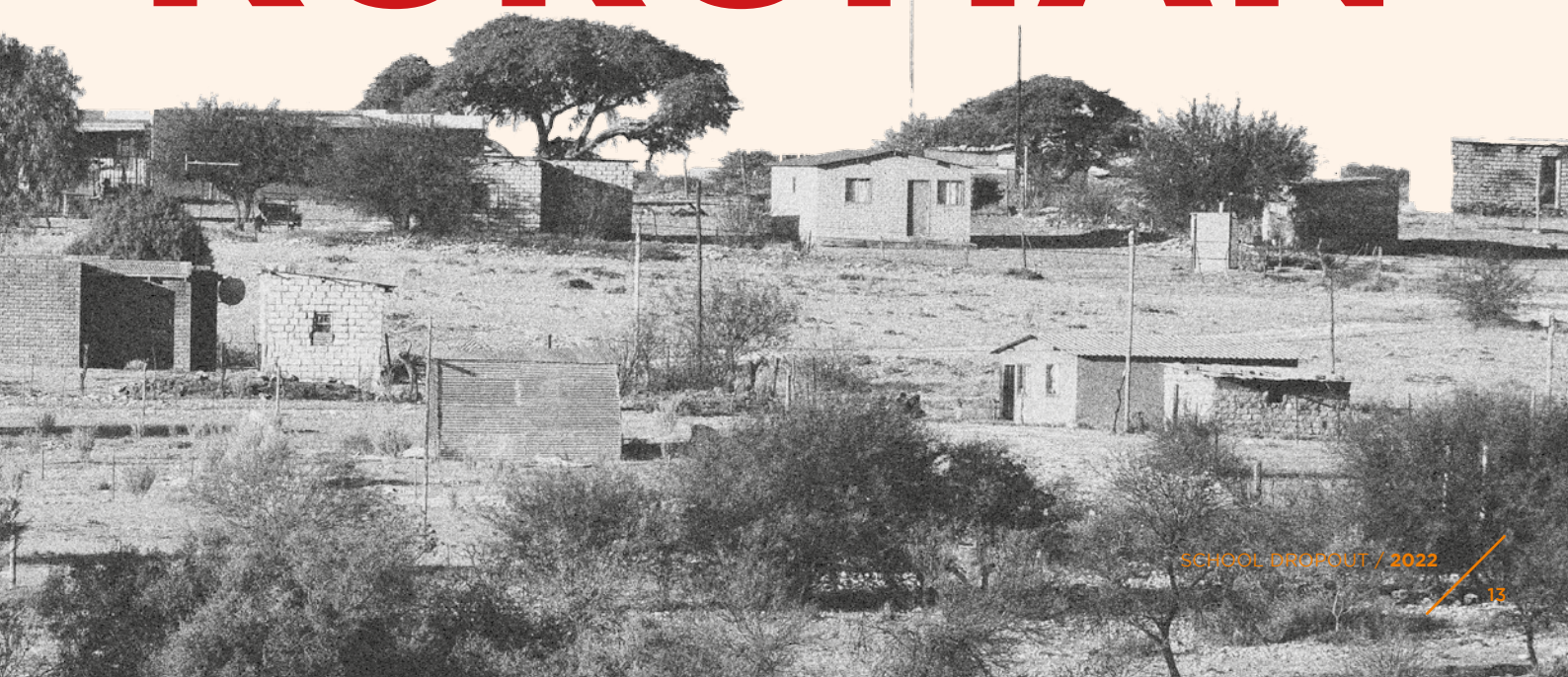
Manganese mines, together with other mines, are the major formal employers in the district. Some who can't find mine work travel 350 km south-west every season to harvest grapes on farms in the Kakamas. Despite the mining boom, workers without qualifications still struggle to find jobs. This is partly because the mines are now heavily mechanised and so demand technical skills. Even for menial work, many mines have employment policies that favour those with matric certificates. Families who cannot access mine or migrant work rely mostly on government grants, including child support grants and pensions, and raise small livestock, like goats and chickens.

The towns and villages of Joe Morolong Local Municipality have usually been relatively quiet and safe. But the mining boom has attracted criminal elements. Mine employees can now afford to rent in larger settlements and commute daily for work. The influx of this new money has caused a rise in shebeens and taverns, which become hotspots for crime, drugs and sex work on the weekends. In 2021, a local police station made the news when a syndicate robbed it of 15 firearms.[3]

The ways that learners, as well as their parents, teachers and peers, experience and interpret the different effects of this mining boom have important consequences both for school disengagement and dropout prevention initiatives. While the mining economy has informed how learners in Kuruman imagine their futures and their place in their community, their struggles speak to those of learners in other parts of the country, who face similar choices and challenges, despite their different contexts. %

Education and livelihoods in the Kuruman region

KURUMAN



THE STORY OF TWO SCHOOLS

A window into learner dropout in South Africa

In Joe Morolong Local Municipality, only half of those who start primary school make it to high school,[7] while only 15% of all residents finish Grade 12. This is compared to a national school completion rate of 37%.[8]

Similar to the rest of the country, dropout in this district is worse after Grade 10. This means that schools like **DITHABA HIGH**, which is one of the few in the district to teach up to Grade 12, bear the brunt of it. But learners who leave school after Grade 10 have often been battling for years, with many having repeated grades along the way. To understand how experiences in earlier grades lead to dropout later on, and what can be done to prevent it, we must also learn from schools like **KGORO INTERMEDIATE SCHOOL** - situated just 5km away from Dithaba.

This publication documents life in these two schools – an intermediary school and a high school – and is also informed by the work and activism of the 'Yethu Club', a dropout prevention initiative which operates out of a local primary school in the nearby Peo Village. Since 2020, teachers at the school have partnered with the Zero Dropout Campaign as well as parents, learners and local community members in efforts to prevent school dropout.[9]

Most villages in these districts have a primary school close by, but because there are fewer intermediary or high schools, learners at the primary school where the Yethu Club is located will have to travel great distances to complete their schooling. Thankfully, government-sponsored transport takes learners daily from the main roads to school and back, but many learners still walk a long way to reach these main roads.

Kgoro Intermediate and Dithaba High lie a short distance apart, in small residential settlements just off the main road to Kuruman. Despite having around 2 000 residents or less, these are among the largest settlements in the sparsely populated region. The stretch of land between and around the two schools is flat and sandy; its red Kalahari soils are covered in small bushes and brown grasslands, dotted with camel thorn trees. Most residents live in brick houses, connected to electricity, and access water through standpipes.

Dithaba High is situated in the larger of these settlements, which is laid out on a grid of dust roads with a few schools, a police station, a clinic, shops and several taverns. In the smaller settlement where Kgoro Intermediate and the Yethu Club are based, residents must travel outside of these villages for healthcare and larger shops. School teachers also tend to commute from larger settlements rather than live in these villages. %

JOE MOROLONG LOCAL MUNICIPALITY STATISTICS

In 2016, the official unemployment rate (excluding discouraged work-seekers) was 39%.[4] 81% of households in the municipality make use of pit latrines. 84% have access to electricity.[5] 12% of residents live in traditional dwellings (such as a hut). 72% live in formal brick houses on their own property. 9% live in a formal dwelling in a backyard/someone else's house. 6% live in shacks, either on their own land or on some else's property.[6]

KGORO INTERMEDIATE SCHOOL

2022 LEARNER STATISTICS

8 teachers

263 learners

107 Grade 7s

88 Grade 8s

68 Grade 9s

Kgoro Intermediate School was founded in the early 1980s by villagers desperate for local post-primary schooling options. They built a structure to house the learners, with villagers volunteering as teachers. Thankfully, the government recognised the school and erected stronger buildings. In 1985 the school was officially opened and teachers appointed.

From the start, it only ever catered for a couple of years of schooling, and after 1994 was recognised as an intermediate school, offering Grades 7–9 to 135 learners. The current principal, Mr Biyela, joined the school in 1995, soon after the advent of democracy. He comes from Limpopo. Like some of his other colleagues, he arrived after hearing of the demand for teaching jobs in this isolated rural district. He has remained ever since, becoming principal in 2006.

Today, Kgoro Intermediate is a no-fee school with eight teachers, including the principal, who also teaches. According to Principal Biyela, around 60% of learners at Kgoro Intermediate come from the village where the school is based, while 20% travel on scholar transport from neighbouring villages.

Relative to other grades, the Grade 7 cohort at Kgoro is large, because many learners are repeating: in 2022, 30 learners out of a class of 107 were in Grade 7 for the second time.

Since the school has double the number of learners for which it was built, space is a challenge. There are not enough classrooms or desks for all of the registered children. The small school hall is used as a double classroom, 30 new desks are on the way, and an informal structure is being built to serve as a storeroom so that the current storeroom can be used for classes. The school has also requested a mobile classroom from the Department of Basic Education (DBE) to help deal with overcrowding. There is no school library and no computer room; the only books available to learners are those used directly for teaching.

A strongroom has been built in Principal Biyela's office to house school equipment, but it was broken into during the COVID-19 lockdown. As Mr Biyela explains:

> **"If you leave a laptop at school it will be stolen, even if there is a strongroom. There is inside information and people will come here to steal. They break in at all the schools – every day they were breaking in last year!"**

Principal Biyela explains that, before 2010, the main road through the area was a poorly maintained dust road, with limited traffic. Teachers stayed close to the school and their presence in the community offered protection after hours. Roads bring change, and when the tar road was built, most teachers moved to larger villages, preferring to commute daily. The unintended consequence is that teachers are now removed from the immediate community around Kgoro Intermediate and the school is left vulnerable to break-ins. Because

schools cannot protect equipment, they cannot introduce technology or equip learners with digital knowledge.

The school has 'enviroloo'-style composting long drops with proper porcelain toilets, but there are not enough to cater for the number of learners. According to the principal, they do not meet the norms and standards for basic educational facilities and need to be upgraded. The School Governing Body (SGB) is funding a small extension to create more urinals for the boys. The government's own reporting shows that in 2013 45% (10 915) of South Africa's then 23 909 public schools had pit latrines, 12% had no electricity supply and 7% had no water supply.[10]

Kgoro Intermediate has recently benefited from the installation of a multipurpose court (netball, tennis, volleyball), sponsored by the National Lotteries Commission. However, its soccer pitch is too rocky to play matches, which makes it challenging for the school to offer a sporting programme.

It's also difficult to have a proper after-school programme when many learners must catch the scholar transport at 2:30pm each day. Even those who live close by often have to go home to do household chores like herding livestock and gathering water. There is also no food available in the afternoons: The National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP) only offers one meal each day, during school hours.*

To offer a more rounded education, the school usually breaks at 1pm each Wednesday for sports. However, the boys have complained about the lack of soccer facilities, which has sparked tension between the girls' netball team and the boys' soccer team. As a consequence, the girls are not allowed to use the multipurpose court until there is fair access for the boys for their sport of choice.

A cohort of young Education Assistants (EAs) employed under the Presidential Youth Employment Initiative (PYEI) have recently been added to the school staff, offering support to teachers in administration and extra-curricular activities, including sports and culture.

Kgoro Intermediate's internal exams show that Grades 8 and 9 enjoy a good pass rate of over 95%. However, only around 70% of the Grade 7s pass, which results in as many as 30 repeating per year.

Mr Biyela explains that up to half of their learners come from primary schools in which they have already fallen behind in reading, writing and mathematics. The teachers put in a lot of effort to catch these learners up, but it often takes an extra year of Grade 7 for them to reach an acceptable level. Mr Biyela knows that these struggling learners may never fully catch up. While he argues that Kgoro Intermediate learners have usually done well when they move on to high school, he also admits that many are pushed through Grades 8 and 9, even if they are struggling to perform academically. The school's grade numbers show that around 40 learners leave school between Grade 7 and Grade 9. In 2022, for example, there were 107 Grade 7s (including 30 repeats), and only 68 Grade 9s. %

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** Where there are budgetary constraints, this is reserved for learners in poorer primary and secondary schools.*

It's also difficult to have a proper after-school programme when many learners must catch the scholar transport at 2:30pm each day.

DITHABA HIGH SCHOOL

2022 LEARNER STATISTICS

24 teachers

679 learners

341 Grade 10s

178 Grade 11s

160 Grade 12s

Dithaba High School was founded in 1994 when community members built two new rooms onto the local primary school for learners who wanted to study beyond Grade 9. Until then, no other schools in the area offered matric to local children. As part of their drive to expand education access, the newly democratic government's Department of Education recognised the school and took it over. It built proper classrooms and officially opened the school as a Further Education and Training (FET) Institution in 2004.

Today, Dithaba falls into the poorest school quintile, offering Grades 10–12 at no fee. While some learners come from the surrounding settlement, large numbers travel on scholar transport from surrounding villages where there are no high schools. Most of the teachers do not live locally and share lifts to work. This limits the amount of after-school activity there is at the school, although there was more before COVID-19.

As with Kgoro Intermediate, Dithaba High has a cohort of 13 young PYEI EAs. These young people assist teachers with administration and other classroom support tasks, and with sports and extracurricular activities. An NGO from Johannesburg runs a daily after-school tutoring programme for 40 Grade 10 and 11 learners who have applied and shown commitment to the programme. The school also receives occasional help from the Sishen Iron Ore Company Community Development Trust, which provides sanitary pads, masks and other material support.

Compared to Kgoro Intermediate, Dithaba has good facilities, with 14 classrooms, a science laboratory and working flush toilets.

The principal, Mr Modise, feels that there are enough teachers (24) at the school, although the class sizes in Grade 10 are too high, with the seven Grade 10 classes having an average of 49 learners each. Grade 11 also has overly large class sizes (averaging 45), and it is only in Grade 12 that the class size is the recommended 32. The more popular subjects, however, have as many as 57 learners in a crowded classroom. Overcrowding is a national concern: a recent report by Equal Education,[11] for example, showed that 74% of classrooms in Gauteng had more than 40 learners.

The school is short of at least two classrooms; as a result, the science laboratory doubles as a classroom. Although there is no school hall, there is a community library alongside the school, which is used especially by matric learners. It is in good condition, but does not have a wide selection of books, and its two computers were stolen during a break-in. The school has a concrete netball court between the classrooms, but its soccer

and athletics field are barren and stony. Volunteer food handlers from the community use the school kitchen daily to prepare meals for all learners as part of the National School Nutrition Programme.

Dithaba High has 16 classes, seven of which cater for Grade 10, which has more than double the number of learners as are in Grade 12. Grade 10 is larger because many learners repeat this grade, and less than half typically make it to matric. The DBE's progression policies[12] pressure the school to promote learners after they have repeated once, even if they are not academically ready. The policy says there should be remediation, but that rarely happens. Even with progression policies, there are large numbers of learners who leave school before Grade 12. School records for 2021 show that there were 226 learners in Grade 11, but 66 of them did not make it to matric in 2022.

Principal Modise has only been at the school since 2020. He started during COVID-19 lockdown, following the retirement of the previous principal. Mr Modise got the job as an outsider, even though other staff within the school had applied. He had strong credentials, with a masters degree in educational leadership, many years of teaching experience, and having served as principal of a school in the USA. Although he originates from a village about 60 km away from Dithaba, he is still trying to bring staff on board with his vision for the school.

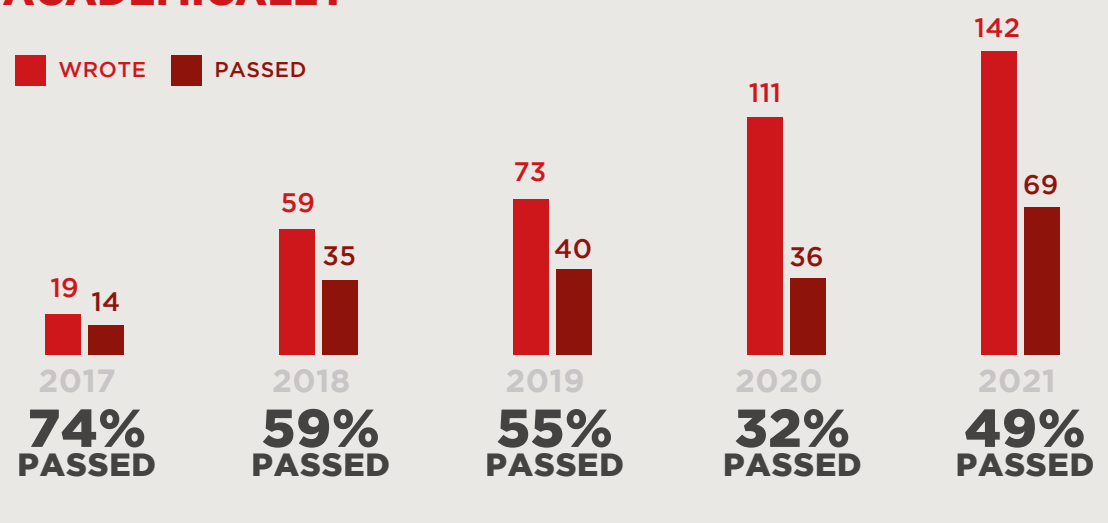
As Table 1 shows, Dithaba High achieved a decent NSC pass rate in 2017 but only 19 learners wrote the exams, of which 14 passed. Since then, the DBE has instructed schools to allow progressed learners to write the exams, even if they are not ready. This has meant that more learners take the exams, but the pass rate has fallen.

As is common across South African public schools, teachers at Dithaba High put a lot of effort into the Grade 12 year, running Saturday classes and holiday camps to prepare learners for the exams. However, getting Grade 12 learners to attend school regularly has been a challenge.

Principal Modise admits that the school has underperformed. When he arrived in 2020, the disruptions of lockdown meant that the school's pass rate fell to 32.4% – way below the district pass rate of 67.2%. In 2021, pass rates recovered slightly (to 48.6%), even with ongoing COVID-19 restrictions, lockdown and rotational learning. %

DITHABA HIGH STRUGGLES ACADEMICALLY

RECENT NSC RESULTS



ZOOM OUT

The lack of proper extracurricular and after-school programming is a common problem for schools across the country. Through partnerships with schools and NGOs in the Western Cape, Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal, the Zero Dropout Campaign has learnt that after-school programming is limited by a lack of human and other resources, but also by transport schedules and safety issues.

COMMUNITY PULL-OUT FACTORS DRIVING SCHOOL DROPOUT

*School dropout is caused by a combination of individual, family and community factors that '**pull**' learners away from school, together with factors coming from within the school environment that '**push**' learners out.[13] Often several 'pull-out' and 'push-out' factors lead a learner to drop out of school. With a better understanding of these factors, we can design dropout prevention and support programmes that respond to the real needs and experiences of learners.*

Partly because of the history of the Bophuthatswana 'Bantustan', many residents of Joe Morolong Local Municipality have very little formal education. Instead, they have spent their lives working as migrant labourers on mines and farms, and continue to do so. Residents with educational qualifications quickly move to the cities, leaving behind only a handful of people who had completed their formal schooling. This means there are not enough role-models who can show young people the value of working towards a good education.

One resident, active in the Yethu Club, explains it as follows:

> **"The culture in our community is that people do not finish school. Most children see their older brothers and sisters not finishing school and they just sit in the village and do nothing. There are no role-models or people to emulate. So they don't see school as the key to a good future. Before we formed our Yethu Club, I went around to try to understand why some of these people were just sitting on the corner and they told me that 'school is not important."**

Learners' parents have often missed out on the opportunity of good schooling; and many learners live with grandparents, while their parents work as migrant labourers. Principal Biyela says that a *'lack of parental support, especially for children staying alone or with their grannies'* is a major cause of school dropout. Unfortunately, parents or grandparents who themselves have not experienced a good education find it difficult to support learners' schoolwork, especially if they are living in poverty or working long hours away from home.

In their work in the North West, Parent Power, a campaign of DG Murray Trust, has found that parents often draw on childhood experiences with their own parents to frame their involvement in their child's education. Given the history of South Africa's segregated education system, as well as migrant labour, many parents would have been either working outside the home or discouraged in other ways from being involved in the child's schooling. Many see their involvement in a narrow way, in terms of providing uniforms and schoolbooks. Schools also narrow parents' involvement by calling on them only when their child is in trouble. Without a strong and supportive partnership between caregivers and teachers, school dropout becomes much more likely.

As part of its efforts to drive community development, a South32-owned manganese mine has started a Partners for Possibility programme. One of the mine's engineers, Mr Dladla, has partnered with Dithaba High to support education in the region. Like Principal Biyela, he points to a 'lack of role-models' in the community, which means the 'community value of education is not high' and even those who did have an interest in furthering their education 'do not see a pathway' because they have few local examples to emulate.

POLO DRIVERS

The way people in and around Kuruman think about the value of education has a lot to do with their experiences of work and the local economy.

For Principal Modise, changes in the local economy over the last few decades have made a matric qualification more important:

> **"With the mines, in the olden days they required labour-intensive systems. Now they need skilled labour. So the net of potential employees is smaller. Some young people are muscular, but they have no Grade 12 certificate. So they cannot be hired because the mine is using machinery. You now need Grade 12 because the work that previously needed 50 people can now be done by one person. So there is a high rate of unemployment here. Some may work on farms, and others do casual labour in town or in the village. But opportunities are limited."**

Because the mines need skilled workers who can operate and fix machines, and there are few people in the local area that have these qualifications, they often recruit employees from outside the province. As one of the engineers at a local manganese mine explains, *'It becomes difficult to have a labour-sending area where the mine is.'*

The multinational companies mining here have to comply with global standards, which require every permanent employee to have a matric qualification with maths and science. The thinking behind this is that employees must be trainable and able to evolve and progress as technology adapts. The trouble is that this conflicts with South Africa's local procurement and labour legislation. To solve the problem, the mines outsource less-skilled jobs like cleaning and loading to third-party suppliers (labour brokers) who can recruit workers on a contract basis without them needing a matric certificate. But these workers can never become permanent employees.

Although there are few permanent jobs on the mines for those without qualifications, there are some lower-level (but still fairly well-paying jobs) available through the contractors, even without a matric certificate. Many villagers say that the best opportunities on the mines are given to outsiders or foreigners, but you can still get a decent contract job on the mines even if you drop out of school. Unlike in the past, even young women can get these contracts in areas such as cleaning.

For some, like Principal Biyela, the changing local economy signals that it is more important than ever to get a matric certificate. For others, the future payoffs of a matric certificate seem far-off and uncertain, especially when there are decent jobs available without matric that provide easy access to money, even if in small amounts.

This attitude is not uncommon in other areas of South Africa: the appeal of 'cool' material possessions like clothing brands and cell phones can become an attractive reason for quitting school early to earn money, either by working or by forming relationships with those who are earning.

Because the mines don't provide hostel accommodation, workers commute in daily. Some manage to buy cars which they flaunt outside local taverns over weekends. Learners sometimes describe these young flaunters as 'Polo drivers', people who are admired because they have access to resources and status symbols: they've 'made it'.

The appeal of 'cool' material possessions like clothing brands and cell phones can become an attractive reason for quitting school early to earn money, either by working or by forming relationships with those who are earning.

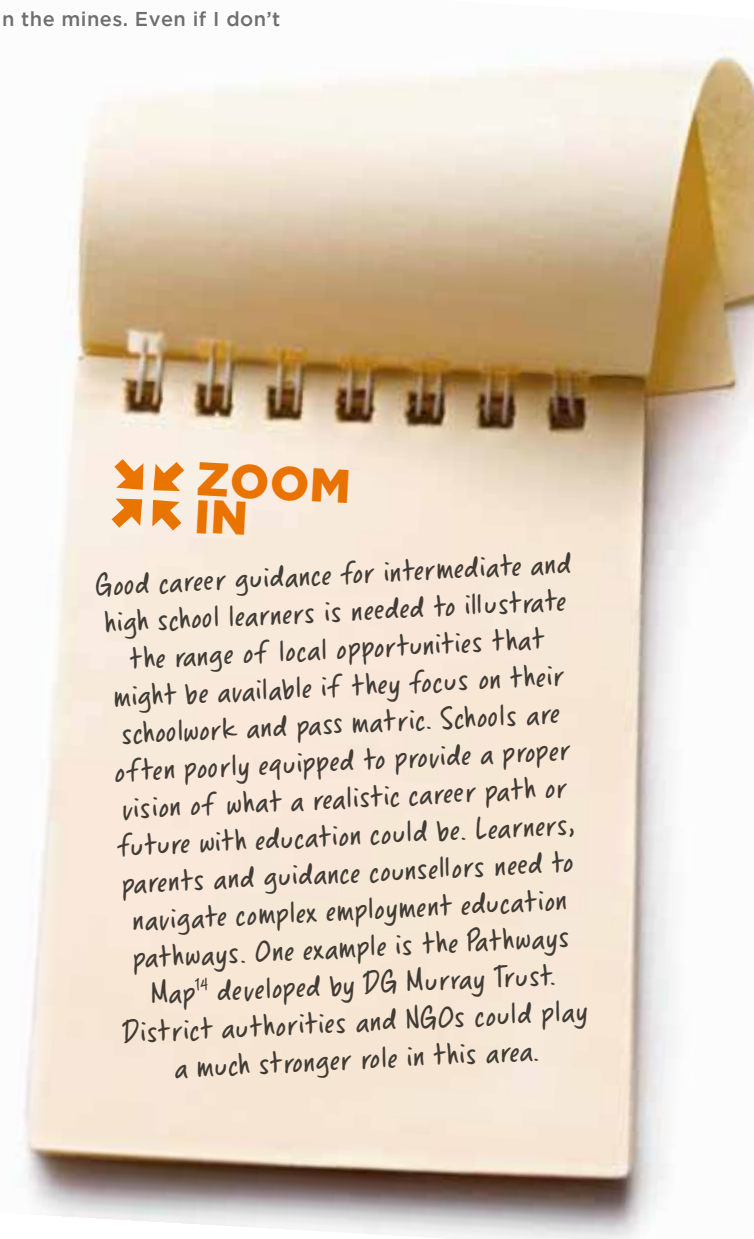
Principal Biyela describes how, even though some opportunities are increasing, learners do not understand the value of education in helping them access the best ones:

> Things are better here these days. The majority of young people are employed in the mines. It's not like in the past when I started working here. It was tough! I think 90% of people were unemployed. But most of the people who are holding good jobs there at the mines come from other provinces. The majority of people from this area, yes they are working there, but they are at the bottom, they are at the very very bottom. Because there is this thing of saying, after completing matric, then they go straight to the mines … Even if you don't have a matric, they are able to get through. This contract thing means they are able to work there. That is why – I want to emphasise this one – that is why we have this problem at our schools, where learners will say 'Even if I don't pass matric I'll work in the mines. Even if I don't have a degree, I'll work in the mine, because my uncle is working there. He's now an engineer, but then he has never completed schooling.'
>
> 'So what are you telling me now? You as a teacher, what are you telling me?' And then, you see, that is where the problem of dropout comes from, because we are competing with the mines. We even raised this matter … that 'No, these mines are employing people without matric', and then it becomes an attraction to these young people that 'What is the use of going to school because we have got a lot of mines here, and they are employing us, even if we don't have matric?' … They can even see someone driving a Golf 5 without a matric, and boasting 'Look at the car that I'm driving! I don't even have a matric!' You see? I was telling my friend it is difficult to raise a child in Kuruman these days because on one hand I say 'education is important', but on the other hand, those who are without education are driving big cars!

The role models for the current learners, Mr Biyela implies, are these 'Polo drivers', many of whom have not completed high school.

A mathematics teacher at Dithaba High, Mr Phiri, agrees:

> Learners tell us, 'You are talking about education, but we can simply go to the mines and work there' … They have brothers who are in the mines doing menial jobs. They see that as their ambition, even if they end up putting on an overall. Driving a Polo is something big in the village, even if you are wearing an overall. So their horizons are not broad. They see the overall guys as their role models.



ZOOM IN

Good career guidance for intermediate and high school learners is needed to illustrate the range of local opportunities that might be available if they focus on their schoolwork and pass matric. Schools are often poorly equipped to provide a proper vision of what a realistic career path or future with education could be. Learners, parents and guidance counsellors need to navigate complex employment education pathways. One example is the Pathways Map[14] developed by DG Murray Trust. District authorities and NGOs could play a much stronger role in this area.

Rising employment on the mines means that more people in and around Kuruman have cash, and the industries designed to entertain these workers are flourishing. For young people struggling at home or at school, drawing closer to people with resources, or drinking at the tavern, can be an appealing escape. Some may simply be curious about more risky opportunities and behaviours fuelled by the mining boom. Peer pressure from those involved in high-risk behaviour such as drinking, drugs or underage sex is high.

Mr Biyela describes the lead-up to pay-day like this:

> **This weekend, just observe this weekend! Because they are getting paid, the mineworkers, tonight … so this weekend – hey! Ah! There is going to be a lot of movement in Kuruman, a lot of movement. And learners are also there. So, it's just bad. Pregnancies! I've got, I think now I've got one pregnancy at school. It's related to alcohol, this alcohol abuse. But sex work, you'll find it in Kuruman, right in Kuruman town; that is where it is very, very common. But it's obvious that it is also here in the villages.**

Parents explain that learners' experience of peer pressure is not just about drugs and alcohol. Children from poor families see their teenaged peers gaining access to various material possessions, which makes them make unhealthy choices based on their desire for these things. As one parent explains:

> **Dropout is all about peer pressure. Kids look for something that their parents cannot afford, things like phones and branded clothes. So those from age 14 upwards start hanging out with bad company, smoking dagga and drinking.**

Another parent agreed:

> **Most of these families are impoverished. Some learners stay with their grannies and most of these grannies are unemployed and relying on grants.**

In the wider South Africa, 13.6% of households are triple generation (children, parents and grandparents), and 4.6% are skip generation (grandparents and grandchildren). These types of households are more common in rural areas.

> **When these children go out of the village to high school,' one parent explains, 'they meet other learners who can afford fancy things, and they themselves cannot compete. So they become hopeless and drop out.**

Grade 12 Dithaba High School learners who participated in a workshop to explore dropout issues captured these dynamics in a series of drawings and written poetry.

The learner who drew the pictures on the following page says of his art work:

> **Here are the children from the villages going to school, boys and girls. And as you can see on this page, here is the girl with her blessers, whereby this blesser makes her pregnant. Blessers get their money when they are working at the mines. They come on weekends, so these girls they wait at the taverns and they get bought alcohol and get pregnant. And after being pregnant, some grandmothers refuse to be left with these babies, so this girl decides to stay at home to take care of her child and drop out from school … This boy, his friends introduced him to alcohol. After some years, this boy is at home, addicted to alcohol and he decided that school will not take him anymore.**

Pressure from peers to drink alcohol
Teen learners going out with older boyfriends or 'blessers' who have money
Teenage pregnancy as a result of early sexual encounters with boyfriends
The long distances learners have to travel every day

This learner also drew the picture illustrating the long distances learners have to travel every day, which can contribute to their disengagement from school.

Despite scholar transport and the school feeding scheme, the long, sometimes unsafe walking distances to the bus stop plus hunger in the afternoons discourage learners. In 2022, the Kuruman river flooded, cutting off many households from the main road. This does not happen often, but at the time it was causing an inconvenience in the area. Some primary school children who would normally walk one kilometre to the bus stop were having to go via the only bridge in their village, up to five kilometres instead. This increased absenteeism in the local schools.

Another Grade 12 learner drew a cartoon strip to illustrate how peer pressure leads learners to drop out of school, especially when added to the other burdens they face. In his cartoon, the main character is shown getting up early and walking a long distance to the bus stop every day. The character returns home at 3pm 'very tired and also hungry'. He must then go and fetch water from the river and look after livestock before finally getting to play soccer with his friends. The last two panels show him interacting with friends who have dropped out. They introduce him to smoking and encourage him to give up on school. In the last panel, he is shown smoking, having left school. He says, 'I can do anything I want at my own time.'

A third learner in our workshop wrote a poem entitled 'Peer Pressure' on the difficulties of navigating the social environment for a teenager:

Peer pressure it's like a Polo car
It drives teens crazy
Crazy and leads them to lazy
Causes them to fall
Fall like a head-on collision car accident

Drawing on the seductive image of the Polo car, the poem goes on to reflect on the lure of drugs and alcohol, which suck learners into 'bad behaviour and dangerous groups'. It concludes:

School time you went along with unruly group
Just to be part of the crowd
Disrupt the lesson, disrespect teacher
Fight teachers and learners
Boom!!! Expulsion!! Future in the drain
Let us stand up and say NO to peer pressure.

The teachers, parents and learners we spoke to in and around Kuruman described a cocktail of pressures and aspirations that inform young people's disengagement from school. While many of these community dynamics are shaped by the region's manganese mining boom, they are not unique. Research shows that in towns, cities and villages across the country, learners face similar challenges – making unsafe journeys to school, feeling pressure to earn an income, and taking risks to get noticed by better-resourced groups (from criminal gangs to sugar daddies). %

SCHOOL-LEVEL 'PUSH-OUT' FACTORS DRIVING DROPOUT

In this section, we explore three important aspects of the school environment and their role in dropout prevention: school culture; the tracking of data on absenteeism, engagement and dropout; and the provision of psychosocial support to learners. The second two flow from the first – a positive school culture includes consistent monitoring and fostering of school engagement, as well as providing relevant support to learners who are at risk of dropping out.

Every school is part of a community context. The family and community dynamics described in the last section have impacted school life at both Kgoro Intermediate and Dithaba High. In fact, adults (parents, teachers and school staff) from the case-study schools often talked about community 'pull-out' factors as the main causes of dropout. A common comment was that most of the school-related barriers to attending and staying in school had been taken away: there were no school fees, transport was provided, there was a healthy meal offered daily, and even sanitary pads were provided.

However, after spending time in the schools, and talking to the learners, it became clear that schools also have an important role to play in dropout prevention. This is not only because a negative school environment can keep learners from the classroom, but also because of the powerful role schools can play in supporting, mentoring and providing a safe-haven for learners who might otherwise be at risk of dropping out.

The six learners from Dithaba High School who participated in our workshop describe school as a place of pressure and high expectations, where teachers and parents are often critical of them.

One participant, Boipelo Selega, wrote this poem entitled 'Pressure':

> *I woke up right / Dressed my bed right / Washed up right / Still I was wrong*
> *I walked right / Exchanged decent pleasantries / Made it early to work / Still I was wrong*
> *I tried not to hurt / Tried not to hate / Tried to always communicate / Still I was wrong*
> *Then I phased away / To remain with me / The only one who truly understands / Now I'm free*

In the poem, Selega illustrates the process of disengagement, propelled by adults who fail to see learners' efforts, criticising them instead.

Another participant *Gogontle Letsoa, wrote a short play: in one scene, a teacher shouts at a learner who is struggling to read:

> *'What kind of learner are you?'* she says. *'You are a grade 10 learner but you cannot even read fluently!! Do you think you are going to finish school while you don't know how to read?'*
> The learner is shamed in front of her peers and asks: *'But ma'am, why are you shouting at me in front of learners?'*
> To which the teacher responds: *'Why don't you just drop out of the school because I don't see the need for you to be here in school. You don't know anything.'*
> Finally, the learner replies: *'OK ma'am, today you really broke my heart.'*
> The play concludes with the comment: *'Sometimes teachers are the reason why learners drop out at school. They are sometimes rude to learners instead of showing them the way.'*

Dikeledi Modise wrote a poem called 'Truth', which depicts a school system that is geared towards learners who are academically strong and unwelcoming of learners with other talents and aptitudes.

> *Truth has neither fear nor doubt*
> *School is for everyone, not everyone is for school*
> *The system of school is for intelligent pupils only*
> *The system of school has its favourable trait*
> *No wonder there are a lot of dropouts*

Dikiledi describes learners being caught between the pressures of home and school, pushing them to choose a life of 'hustling':

People get pressurised by the situation at home
Yet school adds fuel to the fire that is fuming
If you are not strong enough, you gonna leave something
Or I might say if you can't handle the heat
You might wanna be a hustler
Ever since there are a lot of hidden talents out there

Other learners in the group wrote poems about peer bullying at school, which they feel contributes to dropout. In a poem called 'Dear Bully', Boipelo Selega expressed the personal impact of bullying:

Your smiles are well intentioned / Your words less so
You crush my hope with idle comments / Well-meant or not
I suspect they aren't

I am not you / I am not as smart as you / Or as brave / Or as pretty / Or as broken
But still I stay, taking your crumbs / As you see fit to disburse
Your pearls of wisdom / Earned through no strength of your own
Ring false and hollow / Leaving dull welts in their wake
I see that now / A thousand terrible words too late
And enough scars / To last a lifetime

Many learners say that if they experience problems at school, they will not seek support from teachers. *'They will just shout at us'*, they say, rather than help them resolve the problem. They also do not feel that their issues will be treated confidentially if they go to a staff member. This is a very common scenario in schools, with other learners in the Zero Dropout Campaign's countrywide network reporting that if they confide in teachers, soon all staff members will know about the issue and they will feel judged by the other staff.

Although adults in our case-study schools mostly looked outside the school environment for causes of dropout, learners themselves experienced academic challenges, bullying, pressure from parents and teachers, and the lack of a caring and supportive school culture, all contributing to their disengagement.

1. THE ROLE OF SCHOOL CULTURE IN DROPOUT AND ITS PREVENTION

We know that learners are most likely to succeed and stay in schools when there is a positive culture – one that emphasises care and nurturance together with hard work, discipline, service, creativity and perseverance. Much as schools build their own culture, the DBE and its provincial, district and circuit offices also help shape culture within schools. They are the ones who set the curriculum and the system of learning, with an emphasis on assessment. They also monitor that teachers are following the curriculum and keeping pace, using the annual matric pass rate as an indicator of school performance. At schools that are thought to be 'underperforming', the weight of pressure on staff is heavy, especially when they are working with little resources or support.

KGORO INTERMEDIATE SCHOOL

LEADERSHIP

To keep up with this pressure, and create a vibrant, supportive school culture, schools need strong leaders. Principals must lead and coordinate School Management Teams (SMTs), School Governing Bodies (SGBs), parents, learners, and other partners – getting everyone behind a common vision.

Both Mr Biyela (at Kgoro Intermediate) and Mr Modise (at Dithaba High) are supported by the Partners for Possibility programme, which links them to business partners who can help generate support and opportunities for the school, and build a strong SMT.

While Mr Biyela has spent 26 years at Kgoro Intermediate and 16 years as principal, Mr Modise is very new.

Partly because of how long he's been at the school, Mr Biyela has built strong relationships with a small and committed staff. As his business partner explains:

> He's got people who are just as passionate as him about the system ... He also has a staff that is willing and wanting. Not to say they don't have challenges, they struggle, but in that space, they are working well and its positive.

DISCIPLINE

Mr Biyela and his teachers have also built a very good disciplinary environment in which the Representative Council of Learners (RCL) is very active and plays a supportive role. The school has a code of conduct which it updates every year. Mr Biyela explains:

> Our discipline is good because we start at the beginning every year. We start with the code of conduct ... every year we talk to the learners on the code of conduct ... We read it out word by word ... We get the buy-in of the parents and we talk to the RCL and get their buy-in.

The school has rules such as no cell phones, which all learners follow. They also have a policy of keeping the school gates open, and all learners know they are not allowed to leave the school during school hours. RCL members work with teachers and the principal to ensure that these rules are followed. They monitor learner behaviour and motivate them during school assemblies about school engagement.

ZOOM IN

Quality leadership and a healthy school culture are central to creating a school environment of engagement, care, learning, connection and service. This means fostering collaborative, restorative discipline in schools,[15] rather than top-down punishment. It also means working with learners to create an environment of mutual respect, accountability and ownership over one's actions. Without this youth–adult partnership in schools, learners are more likely to resist the authority of teachers and influence their peers for the worst. Collaborative discipline also means creating working partnerships between caregivers and schools to support learners to commit to and engage in their school journey, both at home and in the classroom.

ZOOM OUT

Through its partnerships with NGOs and schools across the country, Zero Dropout Campaign has learnt that many schools struggle to properly understand and intervene in drivers of learner dropout over time. Even in Grade 7, the end of primary school, 36% of learners are already overaged; by Grade 12, that proportion rises to 56%. More than one in five learners who reach matric are at least three years over-age, showing how common repetition is.[16] Like Kgoro Intermediate, these schools often have little choice but to pass the problem of learning deficits on to high schools. Schools can see there are learners who are struggling, but they lack the time and resources to help them properly, given the scale of the need.

One learner, an RCL member, explains:

> **What I do in the RCL is that I help the other learners who are mostly struggling with their schoolwork. And it is very important for other learners to be educated … And education is very important so that young people can improve their home situation or change it.**

RCL members say they feel safe to report issues to their teachers, and that their peers support their role. The main challenge, according to teachers, is that the new Grade 7 intake always takes around three months to settle down and get used to this culture, but once they do, the school continues on this harmonious path. If there is a disciplinary issue, the school calls in the learner and their parents. They only suspend about five learners per year for disciplinary reasons.

Because of this, the grounds at Kgoro Intermediate are unusually quiet, even during school hours. The gates are always open, but no one is needed to guard them. Learners are proud of their uniform, even wearing their hats.

ACADEMIC CATCH-UP

One of the systemic challenges that Kgoro Intermediate faces is with new students who arrive in Grade 7 without foundations in reading, writing or maths. School staff estimate that about 50% of Grade 7s arrive with big gaps in their learning and 25% are unable to read or write. According to Principal Biyela:

> **The primary schools supply us with these learners, and we are too late to refer them to proper assistance. We just keep on teaching them and then send them on to high school.**

He explains that each learner who arrives in Grade 7 is supposed to come with a full profile of their learning situation and needs, *'so that we pick up issues'*. But the primary schools don't send such profiles. This is why at least 30 learners repeat Grade 7 every year. The challenge is too great, though, and the principal admits that he has had to 'give up' and push them through to high school. The DBE's progression policy means that learners cannot repeat a grade more than once per phase. Principal Biyela also says that many parents don't want their children to be identified as a Learner with Special Educational Needs (LSEN) and referred to a special school because of the stigma.

The school knows that without proper learner support or an effective way to catch struggling learners up, they will keep passing these learners along a chain from primary to high school.

Despite these challenges, Barbara Zikode, Kgoro's PfP business partner, feels that the school has developed a positive culture, which can be summed up as: *'Come, let's work and make a change'.* She says that the culture is '*Very inviting in terms of "This is what we want to do, come join us", and it is a culture of openness and partnership.'* However, she points out that there are unfortunately too few partners with which a school like Kgoro Intermediate can link up because of the isolated nature of the Northern Cape.

DITHABA HIGH SCHOOL

Dithaba High School, where many Kgoro Intermediate learners end up, has a very difficult school culture. It is a bigger school, in a much bigger settlement, with more than double the number of learners and triple the staff component. Having appointed a new principal in 2020, they are also a school in transition.

LEADERSHIP

Mr Modise was appointed only months before the COVID-19 lockdown. He brought many years of teaching, academic and leadership experience and a vision to make a difference in a rural school. But Principal Modise came to Dithaba at a difficult time – of rotational learning and COVID-19 control measures. He is still working to build trust and relationships with the staff. *'He knows the classroom',* his PfP business partner explains. *'But it is tough to change the mindset and culture of a school.'*

One staff member describes how the new principal is settling in:

> **"I think we are settling now. We are getting there … I think I was also part of that because sometimes I would tell him, 'Mr, our former principal used to do one, two, three'. But later while I'm alone I realise, 'No, man, I cannot always talk about the former principal' … so maybe I need to give him the chance to operate his own way while I'm supporting him."**

Ms Chanda, the head of Humanities, agrees that the SMT can do more to work effectively together, and that their key challenge at the moment is communication.

DISCIPLINE

Just as the COVID-19 disruptions delayed Mr Modise's ability to build trusting relationships with his colleagues, they have also created difficulties in the disciplinary and learning environment. This affected learner disengagement across the country: between 2019 and 2020, the number of young people (aged 5–18) not attending an educational institution increased by 62%.[17]

Many learners come to Dithaba High having already repeated grades. Despite struggling academically, they are pushed through intermediary school and often arrive in Grade 10 at the age of 18 or 19 with serious gaps in their learning.

Grade 10 is where the school has its greatest disciplinary challenge, with large class sizes containing overaged learners who are not particularly engaged with their schoolwork. Teaching unruly learners is a massive challenge for teachers, especially those with less experience. Rotational learning has also created a mindset among some already-disengaged learners that missing days of school is normal.

Unlike Kgoro Intermediate, the school gate at Dithaba is kept locked at all times so that learners cannot simply leave. This does not prevent some from jumping over the fence after they have received their daily meal.

Unlike Kgoro, Dithaba has not succeeded in getting the RCL to play a positive role in discipline and engagement. In some schools, RCL members or prefects can be seen around the school, monitoring learners at the gate or in between classes. This was not the case at Dithaba, although class representatives do play a role in keeping class registers.

The most rebellious of learners openly smoke in the toilets or saunter around between lessons when they should be in class. Because of the challenges with discipline Mr Modise and his staff often resort to threats or shouting to try and control learners' behaviour.

Mr Modise likes to emphasise hard work, discipline and dedication to learners, showing them that in order to succeed, they need to put in the work. But with disengaged learners, such speeches do not make an impact.

Only half of those who start Grade 10 at Dithaba make it to Grade 12.

While Kgoro Intermediate has struggled to get parents involved in the SGB, Dithaba High has been more successful. Elders from the community committee have also started getting involved in disciplinary issues and social problems at the school. This committee, called Kgomo Modimo Wagae, has as many as 45 members from surrounding villages. They have approached the school to assist with keeping disengaged and misbehaving learners on the right path.

> **We are like a neighbourhood watch,' one elder explains. 'And we started because of the issue of stock theft in the area. When we catch people, we reprimand them or penalise them or take them to SAPS. We then realised there are other crimes that we must focus on, like break-ins and theft in people's homes. We also saw that children in the community are smoking nyaupe and marijuana, and drinking lots and dropping out of school. We approached the school as these are our own children and we needed to talk to them. We started this year to work with the school and form a partnership.**

In 2022, these elders were called in to talk to a group of boys caught smoking drugs in the school toilets. Because they are elders, the boys listened to them. Partnerships like this can encourage local residents to buy-in to education, increase voluntarism, and help to place the school at the centre of the community.

CASE STUDY FROM ANOTHER CONTEXT

One of Zero Dropout Campaign's NGO partners is the National Association of Child Care Workers (NACCW). They work in rural and urban schools in KwaZulu-Natal (and in other provinces as well) and have developed a model to create caring school cultures and radically improve psychosocial support to learners.

The NACCW started off by training Learner Support Agents (LSAs), who the KwaZulu-Natal government placed in schools to offer psychosocial support. This support has changed the role of the LSAs at these schools, positioning them as leaders in the transformation of school culture.

NACCW has gone on to build a comprehensive psychosocial support model at their schools, including educational enrichment, safe spaces, and connections to a range of partners to which schools can refer at-risk learners. School leaders have bought into the model and started tracking absenteeism and engagement, using the LSAs as key role-players in this endeavour.

2. TRACKING ABSENTEEISM, ENGAGEMENT AND DROPOUT-TRACKING

One of the essential ways to prevent dropout is to make sure that learners get the right support at the right time. This means quickly being able to identify those who are struggling with or disengaging from school long before they drop out. By tracking absenteeism and engagement routinely, we can develop an early warning system (EWS) to signal which learners are at risk and trigger targeted support. Low attendance and chronic absenteeism are early signs that a learner needs attention and support, and are important signs of disengagement that can lead to dropout.

According to government policy, schools are expected to submit weekly attendance records through the South African School Administration and Management System (SA-SAMS). Usually, class teachers take a register and feed information about absenteeism back to the school clerk. The clerk then enters weekly data into the system. Schools also keep their own official register to see which learners are absent for long periods of time.

In theory, if a learner is absent for a few consecutive days, the clerk, or even a class teacher, may try to call the parents to find out what has caused this absence. In some cases, they might visit the learner's home and collaborate with their family to try to find a solution to the problem. If a learner is absent for 10 straight days without a good reason, they should be deregistered from the school. In practice, schools often struggle to follow through with this, partly because collecting accurate, daily absenteeism records is a challenge.

In schools in the Zero Dropout Campaign network, large and disruptive classes, together with pressure to get through the curriculum quickly, often means that the registers are not properly filled in each day. Class representatives should help with this, but because they are not properly monitored, there are concerns about the accuracy of registers.

FACTORS THAT AFFECT THE COLLECTION OF QUALITY LEARNER DATA IN SCHOOLS

Capacity

Teachers are overwhelmed by other duties and pressures.

Learner culture

Learners supporting teachers to take registers might mark their friends as present even when they are not. Some learners might also go home after the class register is recorded, but before the school-day ends.

Processes

When data collection is a routine part of the day, different levels of school staff collaborate, and principals take leadership in learner tracking and support. This supports quality data systems.

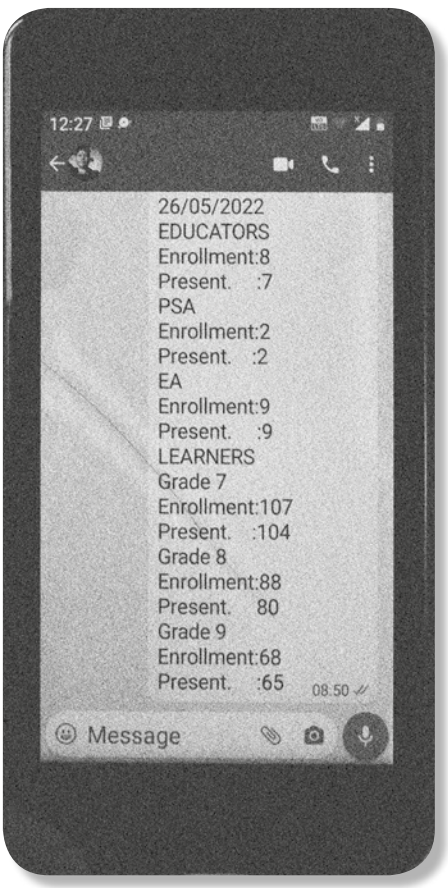
Systems

District-level systems for tracking absenteeism and triggering learner support can strengthen existing SA-SAMS systems. Using real-time technology like WhatsApp can help ensure that data is up-to-date and support is timely.

KGORO INTERMEDIATE SCHOOL

Partly because it is smaller, and partly because of its orderly and well-coordinated culture, Kgoro Intermediate has a good absenteeism tracking system that goes beyond the weekly submission to SA-SAMS. Class teachers give their official registers to the clerk who enters the data into the SA-SAMS system. Every week, the departmental heads check the class registers, and if someone shows a pattern of skipping school, the principal follows up with the parents:

> It depends how long we wait before following up. Sometimes it can be three days, sometimes it can be four. Sometimes a learner is absent for four days, and then the parent phones to say the learner is not well, then it's fine. Sometimes the learner is absent for a week. Then it's us who phone. It depends on the situation. But we talk to the parents first before we withdraw the learner … It is actually easy to analyse the registers, because I can just see, for example, if there is a learner who is continuously not coming to school. The clerk or the teachers will just alert me.



Even though absenteeism is not a big problem at Kgoro Intermediate, Principal Biyela carefully keeps track of how many learners develop a pattern of absenteeism, and he flags them for follow-up.

> We don't have that problem of absenteeism. The majority come to school. Like now I'm worried because I know that there are plus-minus eight learners who are not coming well to school. [Their attendance] is like this – up and down. So, I can easily make a follow-up and then I get the report. I'll phone their parents first, and then I'll get direction from the parents. I know one will say, 'No, the learner is no longer interested in the schooling.' Then I'll say 'Why?', and so on, and we will start talking and talking. And then some will say they are pregnant, they are afraid their peers will laugh at them. But I'll get answers from the parents.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the district has introduced another layer of tracking on top of the weekly registers. One of the school's DBE-appointed EAs goes to each class every day at 8am to get the information of who is present and absent for that day. The principal then collates how many teachers are present, how many EAs are present, and how many learners are present in each grade that day, and compiles a report. This report is sent at 8.30am by WhatsApp to the DBE District Office.

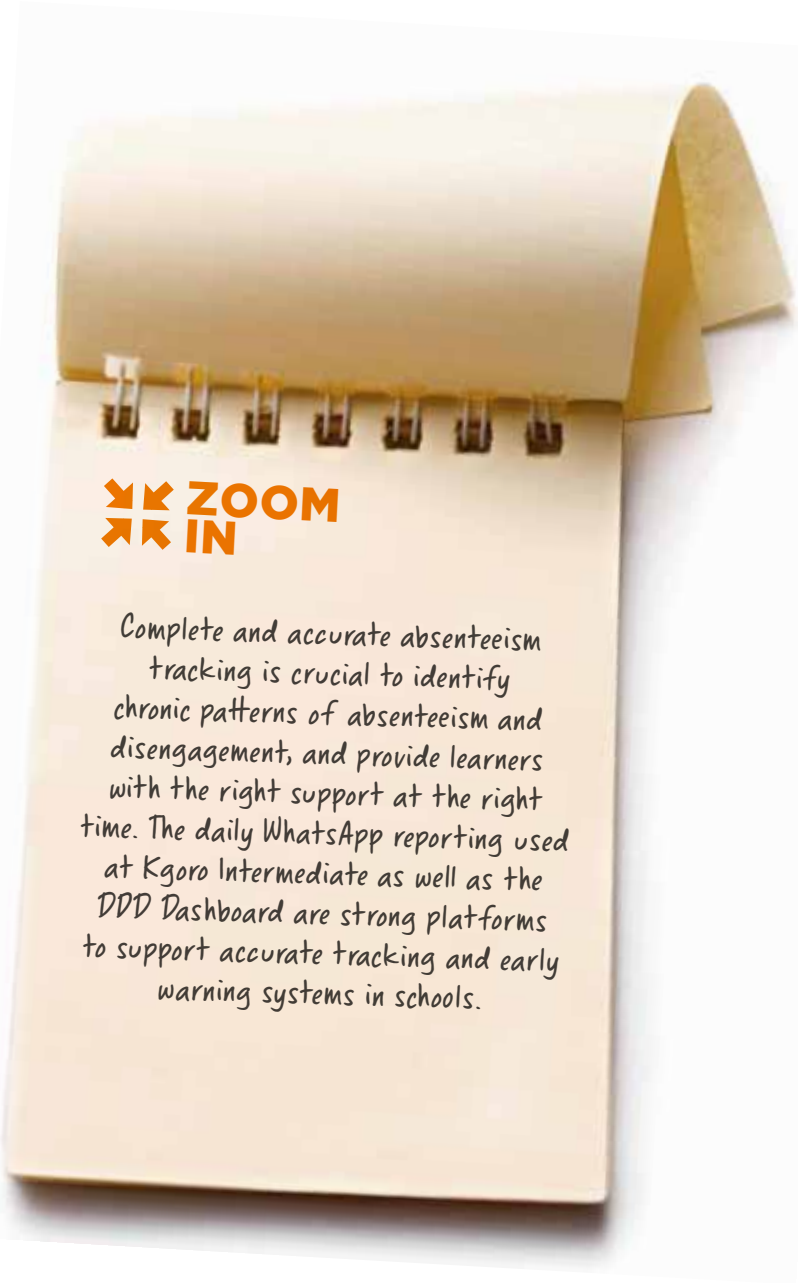
As Principal Biyela explains:

> The WhatsApp thing is immediately, boom! And then the Circuit Manager is having a picture.

The District and the school are regularly and effectively collaborating around absenteeism tracking.

Kgoro Intermediate also uses the Data Driven Districts (DDD) Dashboard, which the principal says is a very useful platform for schools to use to track different aspects of their performance. But he knows they still don't take full advantage of it:

> It's a good system! It's just that we are not used to playing with the system. But as we get used to the system and then maybe we realise its effectiveness, then we will start logging in again and again. But it's a good system because it traces everything, and you can see the patterns of performance, attendance, and so on. It's just that we are not visiting it more often.



DITHABA HIGH SCHOOL

Dithaba High has more challenges with absenteeism tracking. Although clerks provide weekly attendance data to SA-SAMS, its accuracy is questionable. Some learners also leave after they receive their food during the first break, with the school not able to capture the extent of this problem. Teachers' registers are submitted to the clerk at break time by the class representatives. The trouble is that class representatives often fill in the registers because teachers are too busy with other tasks. Without proper oversight from teachers, some staff feel the registers might not be correct since learners might mark their absent friends present.

The clerk inputs this attendance data into the SA-SAMS system at the end of every week. Unlike at Kgoro Intermediate, though, the school does not seem to supply daily attendance data to the Circuit Manager.

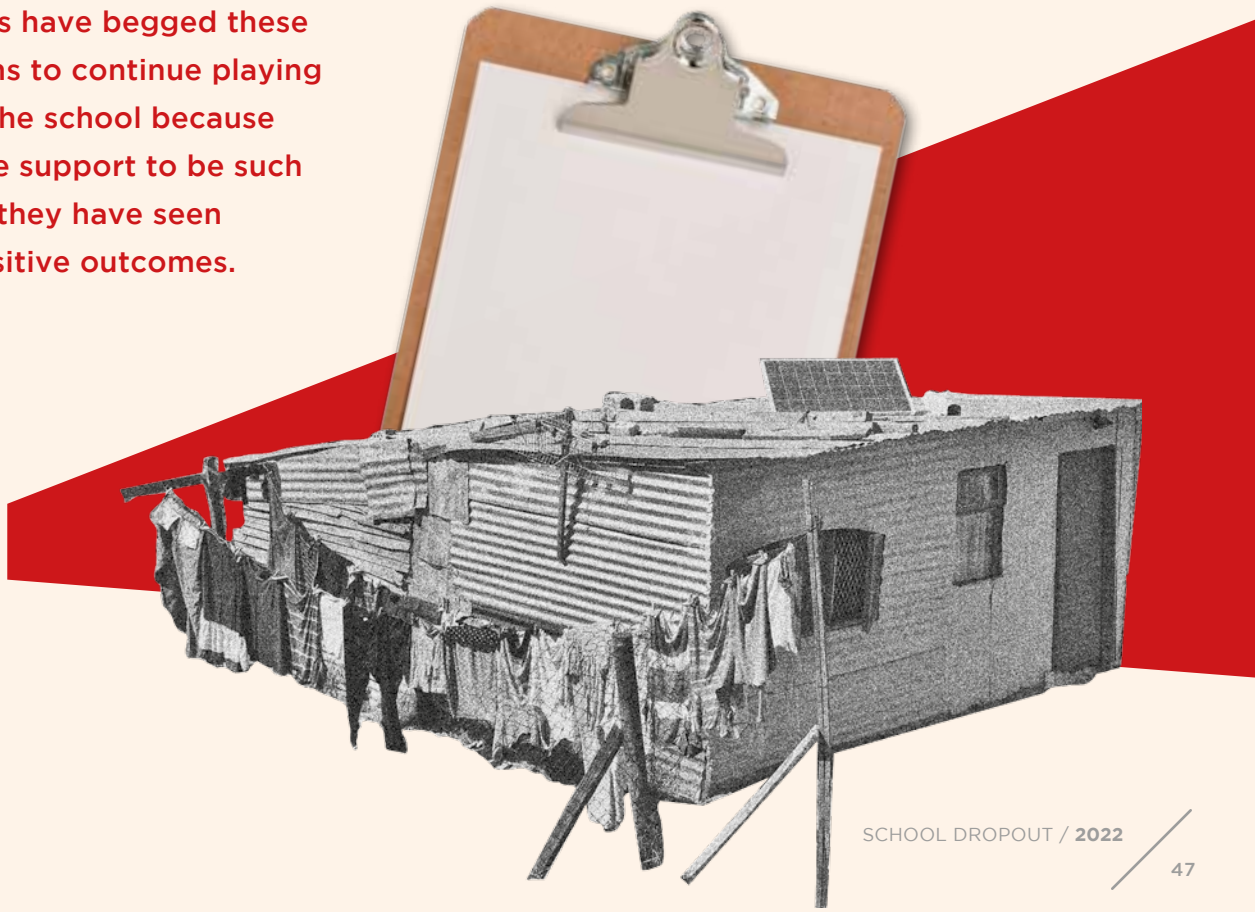
One teacher explains their early warning system as follows:

> It is the class teacher's duty to monitor attendance, like I have said, checking those five consecutive days, then calling the parents.

Unfortunately, parents' phone numbers sometimes change or are captured inaccurately, making it difficult to follow up. If a phone number cannot be reached, the class teacher will sometimes send a learner who is known to be a friend or neighbour of the absentee to investigate the issue, or get an accurate number. If there is no reply from parents, or the issue is serious, the class teacher should visit the learners' home, together with either the principal or his deputy, but this is not always possible.

ZOOM OUT

In common with many other large high schools in both rural and urban areas, the ability for SMT members, clerks and class teachers to follow up effectively on absent or disengaged learners is severely limited. Not only do phone numbers of caregivers often change, but the distances which learners live from the school (especially in rural areas) makes home visits almost impossible for a busy school principal and staff. The high number of learners attending these schools also limits the likelihood that effective follow-up can be conducted. In the Zero Dropout Campaign schools, such as those in Paarl, KwaZulu-Natal and East London, the introduction of a dedicated, trained person to focus specifically on working with vulnerable learners and conducting home visits was a game-changer. Many principals and teachers have begged these organisations to continue playing this role in the school because they find the support to be such a relief and they have seen tangible positive outcomes.



CASE STUDY FROM ANOTHER CONTEXT

Data tracking (on absenteeism, engagement and dropout) has been a core focus of some of Zero Dropout Campaign's NGO partners. For example Masibumbane Development Organisation (MDO) introduced the 'check and connect' model into several East London schools, using closely tracked data on the most vulnerable learners to ensure they do not drop out. Trained mentors monitor these learners closely and provide psychosocial support which helps them to thrive in school.

The continual tracking of a wide range of data on school performance and personal development indicators allows the mentors to address issues as they come up, and work with teachers, parents and outside partners like counsellors to solve the issue. Because of this, the schools have also started tracking absenteeism data better, using an early warning tool developed by the Zero Dropout Campaign. They have also started using the DDD Dashboard more effectively to manage their school's performance and track learner engagement. Learners and RCL members have also become involved in the data-gathering system, taking ownership of tracking attendance and helping fellow learners to return to school.

MDO's intervention shows the added value of having a trained caring adult in each school whose job is to provide psychosocial support, including through home visits, and working with teachers and families to support struggling learners.

3. PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT FOR LEARNERS

Quality and timely psychosocial support can promote school engagement by helping learners deal with challenges within the school environment, including bullying or academic pressure, as well as challenges outside of school, particularly at home. For learners struggling with trauma, abuse, addiction, orphanhood, poverty or mental illness, for example, school can offer a critical safe haven. Yet most schools do not have the resources to support their learners in this way, and teachers struggle to handle the psychosocial issues of children when they have so many other duties.

School-based Support Teams (SBSTs), made up of a few school staff members, are designed to regularly identify and support learners who are struggling academically, physically, socially or psychologically, and therefore at risk of dropping out. SBSTs are supposed to meet regularly to discuss such learners and how best to support them. Meanwhile, District-based Support Teams (DBSTs), which include social workers, occupational therapists and counsellors, are designed to support SBSTs that may not have the experience or skills to attend to learners' struggles. According to government policy, this system should help schools offer inclusive education to children with many different needs, but there are challenges.

DBSTs have many schools to cover so cannot always handle the caseload. Sometimes, schools refer at-risk learners to local NGOs instead. In some provinces, schools hire recent matric graduates as LSAs, but many are not trained or equipped to provide effective support. The same is often true for the young EAs, one of whom is meant to focus on child and youth-care work in a similar role to that of an LSA.

The district in which Kgoro Intermediate and Dithaba High are located has a DBST, but their primary focus is on learners' academic struggles – largely at primary-school level. The DBST also has limited capacity, having struggled to attract psychologists or occupational therapists to this region of the Northern Cape.

At Kgoro Intermediate, although many learners experience the school as caring, there is no functioning SBST. If a case arises, such as one child who was beaten by her parents and came to school upset, Principal Biyela deals with it. Even academically struggling learners are seldom referred for support. Mr Biyela says:

> **We just keep teaching them, so something is wrong with our system.**

Because of its focus on primary school, DBST does not visit Kgoro Intermediate, and the EA intended to offer psychosocial support to learners is not trained to do so.

Learners at Dithaba High need psychosocial support services to help them tackle challenges both inside and outside of school, and reduce the school's high dropout rate. Dithaba High has an SBST: it meets twice per term and tracks cases for referral. Occasionally, the SBST refers a learner to the district social worker. But school staff don't believe this is enough. They often struggle to refer or resolve cases, and don't get the support they need from the DBST.

One of the EAs at Dithaba High is delegated to perform child and youth care work, but she too has not received training for this role. She takes sick learners to the clinic, assists with absenteeism tracking, runs sporting activities, and distributes sanitary pads. Sometimes teachers refer learners to her when they have problems, but learners aren't always keen to talk to her, and she doesn't have counselling skills to encourage them to open up. *'Most of the time the learner does not want to talk. If I ask them if they are living well at home they don't want to answer,'* she explains.

This case study, of an intermediate school and the high school which it feeds, illustrates the complexities of the typical under-resourced school environment in South Africa, and the many factors that feed into learner disengagement and dropout. Together, these schools mirror the overall national picture of limited dropout up to Grade 9 despite the causes already manifesting, followed by a drastic dropout between Grades 10 and 12. Although it is clear that the two schools struggle with aspects of their culture, systems and practice which relate to dropout prevention, this does not mean that those in charge do not care deeply about preventing learner dropout. Although there are many challenges, there are also strengths and assets in both schools that they can build on, which have been highlighted throughout this publication. %

CASE STUDY FROM ANOTHER CONTEXT

Most of the under-resourced schools that Zero Dropout Campaign and its NGO partners are working in struggle to have functional SBSTs. Despite their central place in policy, DBSTs also commonly lack capacity.

The Community Action Partnership (CAP) and Khula Development Group (KDG) have adopted a slightly different approach to assist schools to address dropout. CAP, working in the six main schools in Swellendam, has worked to create a new, shared community vision of education in the town, linking better-off schools with schools in poorer communities. Principals were grouped into an action committee to come up with a collective vision to prevent dropout and disengagement. Schools were supported to activate their SBSTs and CAP created a unique Community-based Support Team for Swellendam, drawing on a range of community-owned resources, because it was recognised that the DBST lacked sufficient capacity. CAP's model became a prototype for other small towns in which schools of differing resources can be linked together to mobilise community resources to redefine education.

KDG, working in Paarl, also worked closely with schools, activating Champion Teachers to help them capacitate their SBSTs so as to provide proper psychosocial support to learners. KDG also sought to mobilise the whole community in Paarl to change the mindset around education, and to provide the kind of support necessary to keep learners in school. It also used community workers to track and trace learners who were not attending school and to reintegrate them. At the same time, KDG also provided educational support to learners struggling with a range of issues.

THE YETHU CLUB: A COMMUNITY RESPONSE TO DROPOUT

WHAT IS A YETHU CLUB?

The Zero Dropout Campaign established the Yethu Network of Schools in 2020 with a goal to create an ever-expanding network of schools that are taking action on school dropout.[18] Champion Teachers volunteer to start Yethu Clubs in their schools, involving parents, learners and surrounding communities in dropout prevention activities.

Although the Yethu Club in Joe Morolong Local Municipality is coordinated by teachers in a local primary school, where dropout is low, they recognise that dropout is a major problem in their area, and have managed to draw in a range of community members to support dropout prevention efforts. Mr Gumede, one of the Champion Teachers, explains,

> **"That's why we included police, a nurse and some of the community members to be part of this club, and the parents also. Because it was going to work easier if we can come all together and see how we can solve this situation."**

Mr Gumede has family who are connected to the local *kgosi*'s (traditional leader) councillors. This has meant that traditional authorities and village elders know about the Yethu Club and support it. The Yethu Club supports learners identified as being at risk of dropping out. These learners have come from within and outside their own community: *'So far we have been able to assist four learners,'* Mr Gumede explains. *'People have been receiving the message that there is this club which can help learners to go back to school, learners to come out of the street.'*

Club members have built up a good relationship with the principals of schools from which such learners come, and work with them to get learners back into class.

Two cases illustrate the kind of reintegration role they are playing:

In the first case, a Grade 9 girl had dropped out of school. Her mother contacted the Club for support. They investigated and found that the girl's father had died when she was young and the girl had never recovered from the loss. Looking for comfort and a replacement father figure, the girl had started to spend time with older boys and smoke nyaupe, before deciding to leave school. The Club members found her in this condition and they called in a social worker to assist the girl. She agreed to return to school, but not the same one she had been at previously. Instead, she went into Grade 10 at Dithaba High School, where she is still enrolled. The Club will continue liaising with her and her mother to ensure she keeps on track with her studies.

The second case was a Grade 8 learner: a bright boy who had shown worsening signs of epilepsy. He received the care and support he needed in primary school. But after joining a large new intake of Grade 8s, his new teachers had not been able

to provide him with the support he needed. If he had a fit, they simply sent him home. He was having to miss many days of school because of recurring fits. His schoolwork was suffering and he was not the lively, engaged boy he should be. The boy's concerned father, who travels to work seasonally on the grape farms in Kakamas, had taken him to the hospital in Batlharos, but the medical staff there had not provided him with the appropriate medicine to prevent his fits. The boy's father turned to the Yethu Club for support. They referred the learner to the nurse and a social worker, and were meeting with the high school principal to talk about the case.

Without the support of the Club, this boy would likely drop out of school. The support systems in his school had clearly not identified that he needed support, nor had they referred him, either through the District DBE, or the local clinic.

Parents involved in the Yethu Club include two women who are also on the primary school's governing body. They are both unemployed and surviving mainly on child support grants, yet are committed to being part of the SGB and the Yethu Club out of concern for the young people in the village.

One of these women was offering psychosocial support to her neighbour's 17-year-old son, who was suicidal, counselling him and his single mother to plan for the future and 'build life forward'. The other is a primary healthcare nurse at a local clinic. She became involved with the Club because she has seen a rise in teenage pregnancies and drug abuse among the young people attending her clinic. She is in charge of the 'youth-friendly service' at her clinic, and sees her position as an opportunity to reach young people who attend the clinic with positive messages, advice and support, which can help them to stay in school. She explains:

> **"Yethu put us together to be a light in many communities."**

The Club wants to become a registered Community-based Organisation (CBO) and community champion, even advocating for the local municipality to improve infrastructure in the village such as roads, bridges and street lights, so as to improve the safety of the area.

Other members of the Club have initiated afternoon sports activities for both boys and girls in the village. One SGB member has started netball for the girls, who meet every afternoon at 4pm. Another of the young men in the Club has started a soccer club, which is now attracting many high-school-age boys.

Mr Gumede also provides tutoring to several matric learners who are rewriting their exams. He has also opened a small Internet café in the little shop his sister operates in the village, which he hopes young people can use to develop and print their CVs and search for opportunities. He was able to set up this shop and buy laptop computers in 2020 with funds from the National Youth Development Agency. %

Involving parents, community leaders, businesses and elders with psychosocial support, discipline, after-school activities and career guidance is crucial. This is especially so in remote or neglected areas where few NGOs work. The Yethu Club is a major asset for surrounding schools and communities, while the involvement of the village committee at Dithaba High is also a good step to address disciplinary challenges.

CONCLUSION /

This publication has focused on two particular schools, separated by a 5 km stretch of road in the semi-arid Northern Cape. Yet the challenges that these learners, teachers and school communities face are similar to other low-resourced schools across the country, with rates of learner disengagement and dropout that come close to the national picture.

Less than half of Grade 7 learners who start at Kgoro Intermediate make it to Grade 9. Many who do complete Grade 9 at Kgoro hope to complete their schooling at one of the district high schools. Some make the journey to Dithaba High, joining a large Grade 10 class. In the end, only half of these Grade 10s reach matric.

Without a matric certificate, these learners, and many others who leave school before Grade 12, face a much more difficult journey to quality work, secure livelihoods and overall wellbeing. South Africa's future depends on these young people, but without a Grade 12 qualification, they are cut off from important forms of social and economic participation.

A matric certificate remains an essential passport to tertiary education, which more than doubles a person's chances of finding a job[19] as well as their earnings and job security. In 2021, close to 60% of all people (aged 15–60) not in education, training or employment, did not have a matric.[20]

Learner dropout also traces existing lines of inequality in South Africa, affecting poor, black and rural learners the most. Because dropout reproduces cycles of poverty, unemployment and inequality, it not only holds back individual learners, like those at Kgoro or Dithaba, it also sets us back as a nation.

Dropout affects us all, and we all have a role to play in supporting learners to stay, and succeed, in school. Meaningful dropout prevention – including absenteeism tracking, psychosocial support and positive school cultures – demands that we capacitate, resource and support schools to hear and respond to learners' needs in the right ways, at the right times. At both Kgoro Intermediate and Dithaba High, there are examples of communities, teachers, businesses, and NGOs coming together and taking action to change the course of learners' schooling journeys.

We know what we need to do. There are learners at Kgoro Intermediate, Dithaba High and schools across the country whose engagement in schooling is hanging in the balance. The next few years of their lives will have a powerful impact on their future chances. They do not have time to waste.

And neither do we.%

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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:

1 / Driving a powerful public advocacy agenda focused on mobilising a range of actors to take action on school dropout;

2 / 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;

3 / Supporting the development and mobilisation of a network of schools committed to Zero Dropout; and

4 / 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

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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