basic education
Department:
Basic Education
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

ADDRESS BY THE DEPUTY MINISTER OF BASIC EDUCATION, DR REGINAH MHAULE, MP, AT THE NCOP MINISTERIAL BRIEFING ON SCHOOL DROPOUT

16 November 2021

Honourable Chairperson of the NCOP, Hon Masondo

Honourable Members

Cabinet colleagues

MEC's present

Fellow South Africans,

Sanibonani

Chairperson, thank you for the opportunity to participate in this briefing. Educational attainment is critical for individuals and economies. Therefore, we aim to increase the number of individuals successfully completing matric before "dropping out" of the education system. However, there is a lot of confusion in the public domain about the so-called "drop-out rate".

In the media, one frequently hears or reads phrases like "drop-out rate". In academia, it is referred to as the "throughput rate". The Democratic Alliance (DA) is married to what they call the "real matric pass rate" as a euphemism for the drop-out rate, so on and so forth.

So, what is the drop-out rate?

The answer depends on the definition. People using this phrase often consider the proportion of youths or people who do not successfully complete matric. On the other hand, the UNESCO Institute for Statistics defines the drop-out rate as a statistic

specific to each grade: The percentage of children in grade X in Year T who neither continue to Grade X+1 nor repeat Grade X in Year T+1.

There are also different data sources that one can use to measure drop-out rates. For example, one can use household survey data (which has the advantage of measuring school-aged children who are not attending school) or use school administrative data. Ultimately, the drop-out rates will depend on the definition and the data sources used in the calculation.

One highly problematic approach that the opposition parties, such as the DA, use all the time is to make inferences about the percentage of children who drop out before successfully completing matric. So they compare grade 1 enrolments (perhaps 12 years prior) to NSC passes in the November examinations – these approaches typically arrive at figures of between 37% to 42%.

But this approach is incorrect for several reasons: 1) the numerator (number of NSC passes) is too low, and 2) the denominator (grade 1 enrolments) is too high. The numerator is too low because it excludes supplementary June NSC exams (or the Multiple Exam Opportunity since 2015) and other equivalent FET qualifications not reported in the NSC report. Meanwhile, the denominator (grade 1 enrolments) is too high.

Thus high levels of grade repetition cause an effective double-counting of grade 1 enrolments (Imagine 100% grade repetition – the number of grade 1 enrolments would be twice the size of a potential matric cohort). Grade repetition in Grade 1 and Grade 2 is estimated to be about 17% and 12%, respectively. However, NSC passes are only counted once. Other less significant factors lead to bias in this calculation, such as child deaths between Grade 1 and Grade 12.

Historical Matric completion rates

Chairperson, the analysis of household survey data indicates that in recent years at least 50% of youths complete Grade 12. An alternative method of comparing the number of matric passes for a particular year to the 18-year-old population of the same year suggests that the figure could be as high as 56%.

But whichever method one uses, there has been a consistent improvement over time. Females are also considerably more likely to reach and complete Grade 12 than males. We can do the number-crunching using the table below, which I won't read into the records for more statistical analysis.

Percentage of 22-25-year-olds who have completed Grade 12 or above, 2010-2019

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Province										
Western Cape	49.6	49.5	48.5	47.0	47.5	51.3	53.2	50.9	53.2	59.8
Eastern Cape	32.7	33.2	25.8	28.2	32.4	32.1	34.2	39.1	37.7	37.5
Northern Cape	37.7	38.5	45.2	46.0	42.7	43.1	38.4	48.2	51.4	51.6
Free State	47.4	49.1	48.9	45.3	46.4	48.8	46.9	48.5	60.3	47.3
KwaZulu-Natal	45.8	51.7	52.3	53.2	54.1	50.7	51.4	50.1	55.1	53.8
North West	40.6	35.9	44.2	45.4	45.8	40.7	42.2	44.5	49.3	55.3
Gauteng	58.3	60.6	59.5	61.6	65.0	63.4	62.3	64.0	64.0	65.6
Mpumalanga	43.3	44.0	44.2	41.9	46.5	49.4	46.3	47.6	53.5	53.2
Limpopo	32.7	33.0	38.4	37.9	40.9	37.9	37.7	36.6	42.0	44.8
Gender										
Male	43.3	42.9	44.5	44.9	47.4	46.0	46.3	47.4	51.3	50.3
Female	48.0	51.2	50.3	51.0	54.8	53.7	53.4	54.0	56.3	59.3
Total	**45.6**	**47.1**	**47.4**	**47.9**	**51.1**	**49.9**	**49.9**	**50.7**	**53.8**	**54.8**

Source: Own calculations using GHS data (STATS SA)

Honourable Members, please also note that learners who obtain another qualification equivalent to Grade 12 (NQF level 4) are regarded as having "completed grade 12 or above". We must ensure that the successful completion of Grade 12 must continue to increase. Still, it is worth noting that SA's secondary school completion rate is not

peculiar among developing countries. According to UNESCO, the upper secondary education completion rate for South Africa has been similar to that of middle-income countries such as Tunisia, Egypt and Uruguay.

Historical Drop-out rates for each grade

Honourable Chairperson, analysis of household survey data indicates that in recent years at least 50% of youths' complete grade 12. Another way of measuring drop-out rates is to look at the percentage of learners who drop out after each grade. The best available estimates of drop-out rates by grade are derived using GHS data.

The table below shows the drop-out rates and survival rates for two different age cohorts, those born during 1985-1987 (and surveyed between 2009-2011) and those born during 1993-1995 (and surveyed between 2017-2019).

These two age cohorts provide a justifiable comparison across time because the individuals would have been the same age when surveyed (between 22 and 26 years old). The specific cohorts were chosen because individuals aged 22 – 26 would have been old enough to have completed school when the GHS data was collected. We will therefore be able to gauge what percentage of them finished their schooling and at which grades. The survival rates in the table show the percentage of individuals who reached each grade.

The rate was then converted to show the number of individuals out of 1000 individuals who reached each grade. It was also possible to calculate the percentage of all individuals reaching particular grades who then dropped out before attaining the next phase.

Honourable Chairperson, please note that several years of data have been combined for this analysis to ensure sufficient sample sizes in each of the cells. It is also important to note that this method provides the most reliable estimates of drop-out rates by grade. Nonetheless, it does not reflect the drop-out that happened in a particular year – the data may have been collected from 22-26 year-olds in 2017-2019, but those youths may have dropped out of school in an earlier year.

The table is provided here, but I won't read it into the records.

Survival rates and drop-out rates for each grade

	2009-2011			2017-2019		
	Survival Rate	Survival per 1000 learners	Percentage dropping out with this Grade attained	Survival Rate	Survival per 1000 learners	Percentage dropping out with this Grade attained
Total cohort	**100%**			**100%**		
No schooling		1000			1000	
Grade 1	98.9%	989	1.1%	99.4%	994	0.6%
Grade 2	98.7%	987	0.2%	99.3%	993	0.1%
Grade 3	98.5%	985	0.3%	99.1%	991	0.2%
Grade 4	97.9%	979	0.6%	98.8%	988	0.3%
Grade 5	97.0%	970	0.9%	98.4%	984	0.4%
Grade 6	95.8%	958	1.2%	97.8%	978	0.6%
Grade 7	94.0%	940	1.8%	96.5%	965	1.4%
Grade 8	90.6%	906	3.7%	94.0%	940	2.5%
Grade 9	85.5%	855	5.6%	89.9%	899	4.4%
Grade 10	77.2%	772	9.7%	82.3%	823	8.5%
Grade 11	64.1%	641	17.0%	71.1%	711	13.6%
Grade 12	45.8%	458	28.5%	53.4%	534	24.9%

Source: Own calculations using GHS data (STATS SA) Note: Those obtaining another non-school qualification equivalent to grade 9, 10, 11 or 12 (NQF levels 1, 2, 3 & 4, respectively) are regarded as having completed the associated grade.

The contribution of alternative educational pathways

Honourable Members, the drop-out picture has not changed significantly when considering alternative educational paths for various reasons.

1) Completion of NQF equivalent levels is already included in the drop-out rates presented above when using household data,

2) A small percentage of youths attend TVET colleges (e.g. 2.7% of 18-year-olds),
3) A minority of youths who do enrol in TVET have not already completed NSC or higher. – 18% according to Community Survey 2016 and 23% according to GHS 2019. This is a problem of articulation which the General Education Certificate (GEC) may address,
4) Completion rates in TVET colleges are poor. Ultimately, our estimates of the percentage of youths obtaining NSC or equivalent don't change much.

The Action Plan to 2024 estimates is 52% if one only considers NSC and 55% if one includes qualifications obtained at TVET colleges.

Reasons for drop-out in SA

Honourable Chairperson, international literature on causes of drop-out in developing country contexts points to a range of factors. These include the effects of household poverty and income shocks (although non-fee schooling has mitigated this somewhat), household labour and family responsibilities, migration, and health problems. These drop-out factors are interlinked, and dropping out is often understood as a series of circumstances rather than an isolated event.

In South Africa, the 2007 Ministerial Report on learner retention highlighted several risk factors. These included socio-emotional issues amongst learners, academic difficulties, access to schools in the context of mobility, poor school resources and facilities, and weak teaching and school management. A study linking learners in the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) data to matric datasets in later years found that earlier learning outcomes were strongly predictive of reaching matric, passing matric and performance in matric (Taylor, Reddy, Van der Berg & Janse Van Rensburg, 2015).

The notion that weak learning foundations are the fundamental underlying cause of drop-out is consistent with the reality that females are less likely to drop out of school than males despite facing certain risk factors that affect females, such as pregnancy.

For children who are not attending school, the GHS asks: “What is the main reason why [this child] is not attending any educational institution?”

Household responses to this question must be interpreted in the light of research showing that the main predictor of dropping out is weak early learning outcomes. The self-reported reasons for not attending school may trigger dropping out amongst children whose academic performance is weak.

But it those same factors might not trigger drop-out for children who are progressing well in terms of learning levels, especially if they are in a good quality school. When considering the reasons for not attending school, it is crucial to remember that low percentages of children were not attending, especially for 7-15 year-olds. The table shows that reasons “other” than those listed in the questionnaire were the main reasons for 7-15 year-olds dropping out.

It is difficult to speculate what those other reasons are likely to be. Still, it is also possible that it was just a comfortable response option given the sensitive nature of disclosing some of the reasons for dropping out. Although “disability” is the following most reported reason why children aged 7 to 15 years old are not attending any educational institution, one should keep in mind that around 95% of learners with disabilities were found to be attending an educational institution.

For 16 to 18-year-olds not attending educational institutions in 2019, the main reason was a lack of school fees. This is a strange result given the availability of non-fee schools and illustrates the limited nature of self-response data. For a further 9%, the reason was that they have completed their education or are satisfied with their level of education.

Honourable Chairperson, it is concerning that among both the 7 to 15-year-olds and 16 to 18-year-olds, a small proportion of out of school learners stated that the reason for not attending school is because they regard education as being of no value to them.

Again, the table below with the results is provided, but I won't read it into the records.

Reasons for non-attendance of educational institutions, 2019

	7 - 15 years old	16 - 18 years old
Other	15.0	11.0
Disability	14.3	3.6
No money for fees	13.4	24.7
Too old/young	11.2	0.5
Unable to perform at school	7.4	8.7
Satisfied with my level of education	6.8	9.3
Not accepted for enrolment	6.6	7.2
Education is useless or not interesting	6.3	8.6
Illness	5.2	3.9
He or she is working at home or business/job	3.8	4.4
School/education institution is too far	2.9	0.6
Do not have time/too busy	2.1	0.6
Pregnancy	1.8	4.5
Failed exams	1.8	4.5
Family commitment (child minding)	1.2	6.1
Violence at school	0.3	0.6

Difficulties to get to school (transport)		1.2
Got married		0.2
Total	**100**	**100**

Source: Statistics South Africa, General Household Survey (GHS), own calculations. Note: Calculation based on the population of 7 to 15-year-olds and 16 to 18-year-olds.

Honourable Members, should grade repetition be seen as a cause of dropping out of school? The answer is not so obvious. On the one hand, repetition discourages children from their educational prospects. It makes them relatively old for their grade so that opting out of school might become socially or economically more attractive.

On the other hand, grade repetition could positively impact the educational outcomes of children if it is accompanied by adequate remedial support. It is difficult to measure the causal impact of repetition on educational outcomes because those who repeat were already academically weaker and more likely to drop out of school than non-repeaters.

Despite the uncertainty around the impact of grade repetition on drop-out, two more essential points can be made about repetition. Firstly, grade repetition should primarily be understood as a symptom of weak learning rather than as a cause of educational problems such as drop-out.

Secondly, high rates of grade repetition lead to education system inefficiencies such as higher class sizes and more “person-years” of public spending on education to achieve the same outcomes.

Impact of COVID-19 school closures on drop-out

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly disrupted schooling worldwide, including in South Africa. Over and above the school closures of 2020, even when schools were officially open, most schools have been implementing rotational timetabling to allow

for social distancing amongst learners. The use of rotational timetabling means that many learners have been attending school 50% of the time or less, even when schools were not closed.

This raises crucial questions about the impact of these disruptions on learning, child hunger and school drop-out. Evidence on the initial impact of the pandemic on these outcomes is beginning to emerge, but perhaps the more pertinent question is what will be the long term impacts on the children who have been affected in 2020 and 2021?

The National Income Dynamic Study Coronavirus Rapid Mobile Survey (NIDS-CRAM), a nationally representative household survey, pointed to a declining school attendance between November 2020 and April 2021 (Shepherd and Mohohlwane, 2021).

Comparing the NIDS-CRAM statistics to the General Household Survey of 2018 (a pre-pandemic benchmark), it was estimated that an additional 200 000 learners had not returned to school in 2021. However, the authors did acknowledge that this number could have been significantly lower, depending on assumptions made in the analysis.

Encouragingly, a September 2021 report published by the Department of Basic Education titled: “Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on school enrolments” suggests that the number of learners not returning to school in 2021 was not nearly as high as what the NIDS-CRAM results might mean. Using official school enrolment data from Term 1 in 2021 and comparing this to Term 1 in 2020, the report concludes that around 19 000 learners in the compulsory school-going age may have dropped out.

In addition, it is estimated that about 27 000 fewer first-time enrolments in school were registered in 2021. However, this report clearly does not confirm a dramatic increase in drop-out as might have been concluded based on NIDS-CRAM. Even if we are not

exactly sure how many children have dropped out of school already due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it is safe to conclude from the available evidence that school attendance has been seriously affected by the pandemic.

Clearly, this level of disengagement presents a risk of learners ultimately dropping out of school altogether. More learners than usual may drop out of school soon due to disengagement, mainly throughout 2020 and 2021. However, in the medium to long run, the greater risk of dropping out remains weak learning foundations occasioned, in this case by lost curriculum time.

Initiatives to address drop-out

To deal with COVID-19 related drop-out, the Department of Basic Education has fought to protect teaching time - vaccinating teachers and protecting the number of official school days. We have also ensured school compliance with COVID-19 safety protocols and encouraged a return to regular timetabling. We will also continue to work to ensure the smooth delivery of the National School Nutrition Programme.

In June 2020, we implemented a back-to-school communications campaign utilising various platforms (print media, social media radio and broadcast television) to allay parents' fears. Furthermore, we communicated to the education sector our readiness to prevent and contain COVID-19 infections in schools. In the long run, all our learning improvement strategies must include improvements in Early Childhood Development and solidify early learning foundations as a silver bullet to reducing vulnerability to dropping out. There are also numerous pro-poor policies and programmes in place to mitigate the triggers of drop-out.

These include the No-fee School Policy, the Learner Transport Programme, and the Integrated School Health Programme. By utilising school-based learner support agencies (LSAs), vulnerable learners who are likely to drop out are identified and

supported with home visits and linkages to services to address the vulnerabilities. LSAs also follow up on learners with extended absenteeism (risk of dropping out) from school, facilitate return to school, and link them up to support agencies.

Finally, the DBE is leading amendments to the South African Schools Act (SASA) through the Basic Education Laws Amendment (BELA) Bill. Concerning learner dropout penalty clauses for failure to ensure that a learner in the compulsory ages of schooling attends school are contained in the BELA Bill. There is also a new subsection 3(7) being proposed. In addition, a new section 4A has been added to make the principal, educator and SGB responsible where a learner does not return to school.

Our Recommendations to reduce drop-out

The long term priority, made more urgent by the COVID-19 pandemic, is to deal with the fundamental cause of drop-out, which is weak learning foundations. Now that schools are open again, we will work without ceasing to protect teaching time and keep schools open for as long as possible. The pandemic has demonstrated that remote learning is not yet a viable option for most children (only 8% of households with children had internet access – GHS 2018).

The low risk posed to children by COVID-19 and the successful teacher vaccination campaign makes regular school attendance viable. There is also a need to mainstream technical and vocational educational pathways and promote better articulation between these pathways and the basic education ecosystem. Implementing a new General Education Certificate is one of the government's critical plans in this regard.

Ngiyabonga.