

ZERO
DROP/OUT

POLICY BRIEF



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Around 40% of learners who start Grade 1 will exit the schooling system before completing Grade 12¹ because of various push and pull factors that relate to experiences, influences and conditions inside and outside of the school environment. Although much work has been done to improve the quality of education at public schools since the end of Apartheid, a comprehensive, multi-stakeholder and data-driven approach to reducing the rate of school dropout is much-needed.

International best practice has shown the effectiveness of data-driven approaches to monitoring disengagement and dropout. The Department of Basic Education (DBE) through the South Africa School Administration and Management System (SA-SAMS) and the Data Driven Districts (DDD) programme is currently piloting an Early Warning System, as well as an intervention diagnostic report.

These one-page reports are EMIS-linked and available to school officials. Where the mechanisms are in place, the pilot project is an opportunity for officials to connect a series of relevant indicators with high-level state and provincial KPIs. This would, in turn, allow for the development of implementation frameworks that are measurable, evidence-based and linked to real education outcome indicators. When the issue of dropout is factored into policy and planning frameworks, officials are better equipped to address the root causes of poor learning outcomes.

This brief proposes a set of policy and implementation options to meaningfully address the problem of learner dropout:

- The development of robust referral systems and inter-sectoral collaboration
- Partnerships to scale up interventions that have proven to work
- Proposals to utilise EMIS as a tool to reduce school dropout with clear sets of learner-level indicators that can be aggregated.

Considering the deep levels of poverty, inequality and unemployment in sub-Saharan Africa, the return on investment to schooling is highest in this region², and as such, there is a social justice imperative to ensure that learners are able to complete school with the necessary skills and aptitude to take advantage of future opportunities. Getting education right is a means to achieving a range of other social and economic goals as outlined in the National Development Plan (NDP).

These goals include reducing poverty and inequality, tackling unemployment, and ensuring a better quality of life for all South African citizens. In a country where the economy is not growing fast enough to support entrepreneurial activity in a meaningful way³, research has found that completing school and following conventional pathways to employment remain the most reliable way to escape the trap of poverty.

INTRODUCTION

In research and policy circles, the term dropout is best understood as the outcome of a process of disengagement: “A cumulative, multidimensional process caused by the convergence of a number of factors over time⁴.” According to Rumberger and Rotermund (2012), there is no single indicator that entirely accounts for a learner’s decision to drop out and school-related factors⁵ are not the only drivers. Understanding this is key to developing a strategic response to the problem.

Dropout is both episodic and systemic, requiring both case-by-case considerations as well as systemic solutions. High-level political will is needed to ensure that key indicators are efficiently tracked through the state machinery with a strategic commitment to reducing the overall dropout rate.

Learner disengagement is a complex topic; international research suggests that there are as many as 40 different risk indicators relating to dropout⁶. Apart from contextual factors — potentially outside of the control of education stakeholders — there are school-level factors that require targeted policies. Improving the quality of education at the foundation level of a child’s education will help to prevent learners from falling behind academically.

Schools also need to be adequately resourced with proper infrastructure, qualified teachers and functioning amenities. By far the most compelling driver of dropout — one which the department is in a strong position to address — is a lack of “school social capital⁷”. This speaks to how teachers engage with learners on a daily basis, the school’s culture, and whether there is a supportive and safe environment for the learner to thrive.

Due to the fact that school dropout is an outcome of a significant and complex set of social issues⁸, it demands a scaled and systemic response that may be impossible to standardise without the use of credible data. Thus, this policy brief explores the role of efficient data collection and monitoring systems to identify and refer learners who need additional support services.

The implementation options outlined in this policy brief rely strongly on credible data to scale the necessary interventions and achieve equitable education outcomes.



**“TO DROP OUT”
= to permanently leave
school before writing the
National Senior Certificate
(matric) exam or obtaining
another National Qualifications
Framework (NQF) Level 4
qualification.**

HOW TO PREVENT SCHOOL DROPOUT

Based on local and international research as well as the policy options presented in this brief, the Zero Dropout Campaign recommends a programme of action that will assist policy-makers to lay the foundation for a supportive institutional structure.

- Develop a Framework for School Dropout, including a repository of indicators and a measurement framework for complex systems.
- Develop an indicator-related assessment system linked to the new SA-SAMS.
- Establish a Learnership on how to use data to inform interventions. This should include a certified qualification to become a School Assistant.
- Fund and test interventions as well as public-private models for service delivery and support intervention programmes at scale.
- Develop the institutional processes necessary for effective interventions at school (including quality assurance and accreditations, structures such as the SBST and relevant diagnostic assessments). Facilitate the formation of lasting partnerships to ensure nationwide coverage and implementation.
- Establish effective monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.

DATA-RELATED POLICY OPTIONS

The development of the Data Driven Districts (DDD) dashboard, a collaboration between the DBE and the Michael and Susan Dell Foundation (MSDF) is a positive step toward realising the potential contained in SA-SAMS data. Giving learner-level data to officials at the school and district levels (and then feeding this into the PSS to inform referrals) indicates critical and substantial progress.

This tool — the management of which falls within the mandate of the DBE — has also been developed to generate insights for education officials and school leadership. This can be used to detect and identify learners at risk of failing and who need academic intervention. The system is able to provide the evidence needed to improve governance at schools, monitor and improve learner performance, and identify at-risk learners.

What is missing is a high-level systemic positioning of these reports and indicators, linking them to state KPIs.

The DDD already has a basic Early Warning System (EWS) in place, which is linked to SA-SAMS data, and is available to principals in eight provinces. However, there are some critical opportunities available to policy-makers in 2020 that should be explored with urgency.

The SA-SAMS rewrite is a critical opportunity to address three main questions:

- Are we using the most relevant indicators to inform our Early Warning Systems?
- How do we share data effectively throughout the different levels of the education system?
- Are we collecting the right type of data?

→ **RELEVANT INDICATORS AND COLLECTING THE RIGHT TYPE OF DATA**

Establishing a common set of indicators is a critical first step in ensuring that evidence-based dropout prevention programmes actually work. It is important to define the indicators and ensure that these standardised definitions are accepted by all stakeholders. Currently, data is only available at the aggregate level, which makes the development of diagnostic tools difficult. We also need a clear definition of dropout as it relates to key EMIS-defined indicators. Including this in the operational oversight of the DBE would significantly raise the profile of dropout prevention initiatives.

The next step is to utilise the indicators used in daily school administration monitoring to inform a high level of KPIs, which can be reducible to learner-level data. These KPIs should be built into Medium-Term Strategic Frameworks to ensure comprehensive adherence and accountability. Provincial and national departments need to account for dropout statistics and the effectiveness of their interventions.

Finally, departments must make provision for Data Assistant posts in schools. These appointments will help schools to identify and respond to the needs of learners, and ultimately reduce dropout. Data management is a time and resource intensive task, which is why additional capacity is needed in schools.

INTERVENTION-RELATED POLICY OPTIONS

There are a range of community and family-level factors that contribute to a learner's decision to drop out. For instance, various studies have found a high incidence of post-traumatic stress and similar disorders among South African children⁹.

Although there are a range of policies and processes in place, including White Paper 6, the Psychosocial Support Strategy (PSS) and others, there are no explicit and actionable plans and procedures for systematically ensuring that the right support services are available in all schools.

This brief recommends the following steps to overcome gaps in the testing and implementation of psychosocial interventions...

→ **BUILD SYSTEMS FOR ASSESSING LEARNER ENGAGEMENT**

The four key measures used by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) to assess student engagement are as follows:

- Lack of punctuality
- Absenteeism
- Sense of belonging
- Attitudes towards school

Similarly, UNICEF has released a series on monitoring for learner engagement, which spells out the “ABCs” of monitoring for dropout. The strength of this approach is that it uses existing EMIS indicators, rather than requiring additional assessments.

- Academic Results
- Behaviour Problems
- Chronic Absenteeism

The Zero Dropout Campaign has piloted a range of Early Warning Systems (EWS) and Psychosocial Support Strategy programmes, offering robust proof of concept for monitoring learner engagement.

→ **DEVELOP AN EFFECTIVE INTER-DEPARTMENTAL/ INTER-SECTORAL REFERRAL SYSTEM**

The Psychosocial Support Strategy 2015-2020, as well as its M&E structure provides the institutional framework for the implementation of dropout prevention strategies. Such strategies, which focus specifically on outcomes of improved learner engagement, and a reduction in dropout have the potential to more directly impact on learner achievement as they speak comprehensively to a number of root causes of dropout. District and School-Based Support Teams are already in place and provide a sound institutional framework for this type of work. However, the human resources needed to administer, implement and monitor these referrals are lacking in various schools. By building this capacity and empowering education institutions to address the root causes of disengagement and dropout, more learners would be able to receive the support they need to prosper.

→ **BUILD PARTNERSHIPS AROUND THE IMPLEMENTATION OF INTERVENTIONS**

The Zero Dropout Campaign currently partners with NGOs and civil society stakeholders to deliver critical services at school and community level. Creating a formal mandate for schools and districts to actively seek the support of these organisations to develop and implement interventions to support learners is a critical next step in tackling the problem of dropout.

The indicators of academic attainment, repetition¹⁰, attendance and behaviour have been identified as the four leading person-level or learner-level indicators critical to monitoring for the prevention of dropout in the South African context.

OTHER POLICY OPTIONS

→ REVIEW THE POLICY ON PROGRESSION

Although intended to reduce dropout and ensure learner retention, the current policy is not having the desired effect. Data shows that the rate of dropout in matric for progressed learners is higher than for non-progressed learners, indicating that this policy may be having the opposite effect. *“Grade retention and being past the typical age in a grade are two of the most important predictors of school dropout”*¹¹. The assumed causation is that learners who are not progressing or are struggling academically, are those who are retained, and are also those who are dropping out of school. This needs to be explored further to ascertain appropriate policy alternatives.

→ BROADEN THE FOCUS TO INTERVENTIONS WHICH REMEDIATE LEARNING BACKLOGS, SUCH AS IN BASIC LITERACY

There is a strong need to help learners to close critical learning gaps. Although education quality does not guarantee engagement and prevent dropout, it is the case that poor learner attainment, particularly in foundational skills leads to disengagement and dropout¹². In many cases, where more severe problems do not present, simply being unable to read for comprehension, or perform simple mathematical literacy tasks can be a catalysts. Programmes on literacy coaching, basic numeracy catch-up programmes, and reading for meaning programmes should all be explored in depth by government to consolidate a body of intervention research to contribute to the conversation around dropout prevention.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

AGGREGATE DATA

Information or data that has been collected from multiple sources and/or on multiple measures, variables or individuals, and then compiled into summaries – typically for the purposes of public reporting or statistical analysis.

EDUCATION INFORMATION MANAGEMENT SYSTEM (EMIS)

EMIS refers to a group of data management systems intended to collect, store, analyse and report education data and information at different levels of the education system to support administration and inform management.

NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK (NQF)

This integrated framework serves to award registered learners with national accreditation based on their skills and knowledge. The National Qualifications Framework (NQF) is made up of 10 levels that fall within 3 bands: The General Education and Training (GET), the Further Education and Training (FET) band and Higher Education. A matric, or qualifications of a similar level, are classed as NQF4.

NATIONAL SENIOR CERTIFICATE

Commonly known as a matriculation (matric) certificate, the National Senior Certificate (NSC) is the main school-leaving certificate in South Africa. It requires three years (Grades 10, 11 and 12) to be eligible to write exams for this NQF4 qualification.

SCHOOL DROPOUT

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

ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

DBE	Department of Basic Education
DDD	Data Driven Districts
KPI	Key Performance Indicator
NLF	New Leaders Foundation
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
NQF4	National Qualifications Framework Level 4
NSC	National Senior Certificate (also known as a matric certificate)
PSS	Psychosocial Support Strategy
SA-SAMS	South African Schools Administration and Management System
SBST	School Based Support Team

SCHOOL COMPLETION VS. SCHOOL DROPOUT

The word 'dropout' often calls up images of lazy, irresponsible teens, who aren't in school because of their own poor choices. **But this is usually not the case.** Because 'dropout' carries this stigma, some who work in this field prefer the term 'school completion'. In this publication, we have chosen to stick with 'dropout' because it demands sharper, clearer action. **As a society, we should expect ZERO DROPOUT!**

ENDNOTES

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Zero Dropout is a national campaign working towards halving the rate of school dropout by 2030.

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