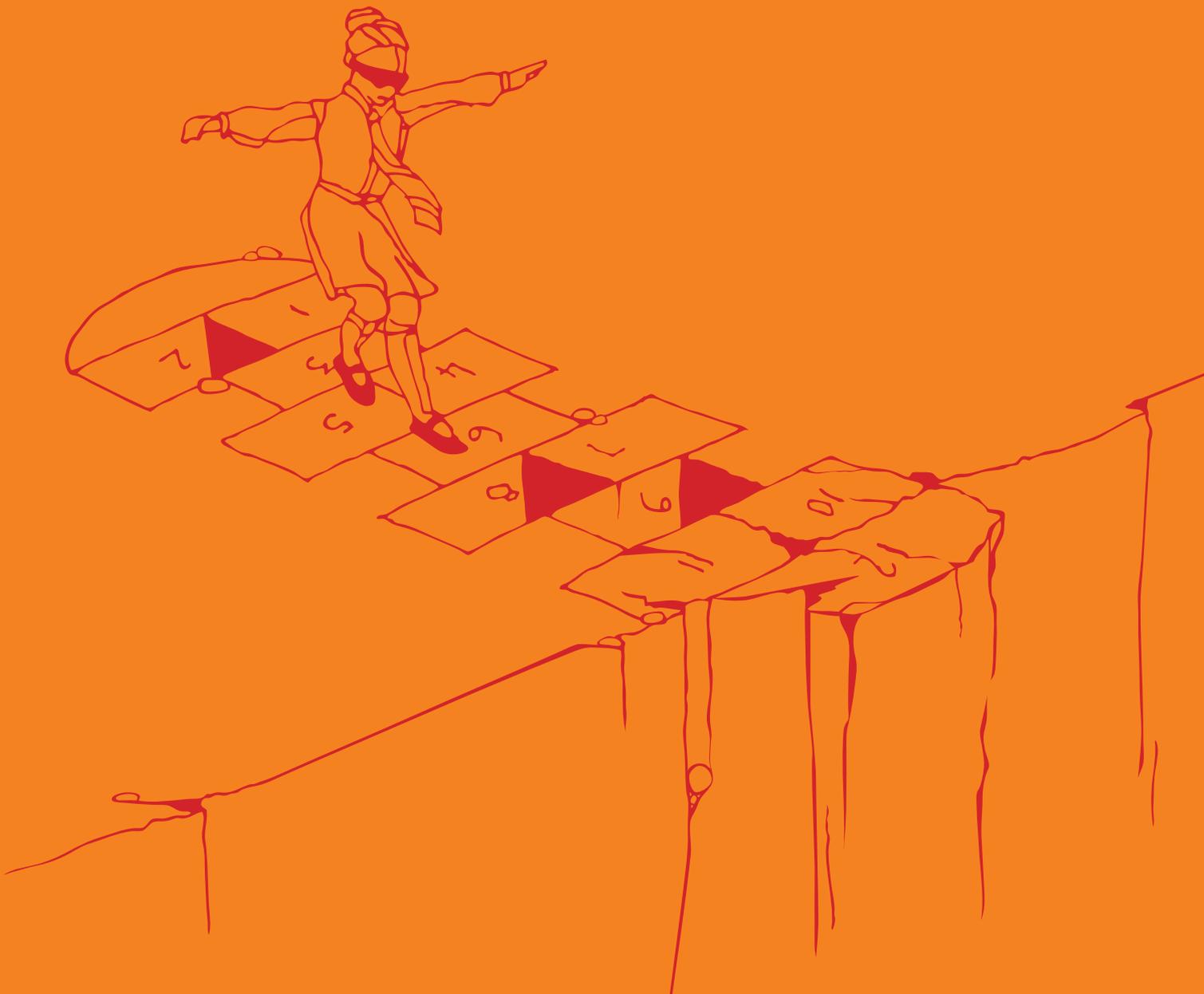


ZERO
DROP/OUT

SCHOOL DROPOUT

WHAT'S THE CATCH? / 2019



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
DROP/OUT**

ANGELO*, a Grade 10 learner at a high school in Cape Town, is the only member of his family on track to finish school. This is why he says he's determined to get his matric:

*"I used to be one of those people who would judge kids for dropping out of school. We'd go up to them and say, "Jy hou jousef groot**", but you're not even in school." We'd judge them because they were so young – some just 13 years old – and because, to us, they weren't living; they were just existing. But, since joining a dropout committee*** at school, my views have changed. I've learnt there are many things that cause dropout; we don't really know what's going on in a person's life that causes them to do so.*

I think corporal punishment is one of the main reasons people drop out at my school. Even though it's illegal, some teachers will rush into noisy classrooms and start hitting learners with a stick or plastic pipe. If a learner gets hit, they can start to feel anxious, and bunk lessons. Once they've missed enough days of school, they drop out. That's how easily it can happen.

I've never dropped out or failed a grade, but dropout is nothing new to me. I share a two-bedroom house with 12 people, including three of

my cousins. They are aged 15, 21 and 25 – and all three have dropped out of school. My cousin Aliya dropped out in Grade 11 because she felt school was boring. She was the only person in her group of friends to pass Grade 10. One of her teachers tried to support her. He saw a lot of potential in her, but back then, Aliya was very rebellious and thought she knew better. Now she spends every day looking in the classifieds for a job that pays well. I think she regrets dropping out.*

The reason I choose to stay in school is because I know what the alternative is. I see my cousins' lives and I don't want that for myself. Some of them stay home watching TV all day. One has a baby and there are times when she can't provide things like nappies for him. I don't want to see my own children in this situation. I want to make a success of my life, and for me that means being completely independent.

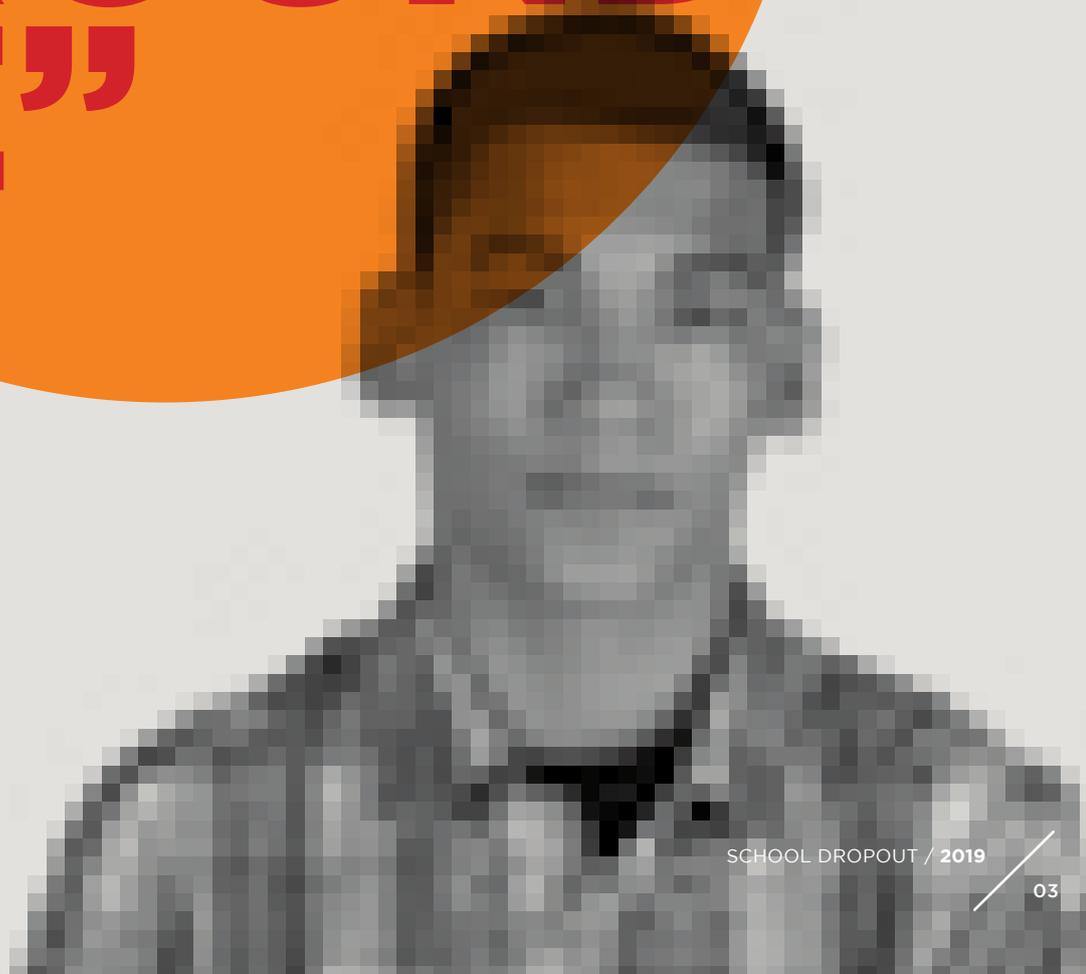
One of my aunts is an example to me. She works for a bank. She never runs out of things and never has to ask anyone to lend her anything. My whole family has their hopes on me. No one has a degree in my family, and they hope I will be the first. They tell me I will change their lives. It makes me feel proud and motivated to work harder."

* Name has been changed to protect the person's identity.

** Slang for "too big for your boots" in Afrikaans.

*** Run by a Cape Town-based NGO, the school dropout committee uses critical and participatory action research methodology to deal with learner disengagement and other factors relating to learner dropout.

**“SCHOOL
DROPOUT
IS ALL
AROUND
ME”**



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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.

DISAGGREGATED DATA

Data that has been broken down by detailed sub-categories (i.e. by learner or school) to reveal insights that may not be fully reflected in aggregated data.

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.

GENERAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING (GET)

Also known as the Basic Education band in the NQF, this level of education comprises Grades R to 9. This band can be further divided into three phases: the Foundation Phase (Grades 1 to 3), Intermediate Phase (Grades 4 to 6), and Senior Phase (Grades 7 to 9).

NATIONAL CERTIFICATE (VOCATIONAL)

The National Certificate (Vocational), or NC(V) is the certificate awarded to a candidate who has fulfilled the exit-level outcomes required for this qualification at Level 4 on the NQF. The NC(V) was introduced in 2007 as a parallel track to the NSC, to prepare learners for occupation-specific training, and takes three years to complete.

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.

BACHELOR PASS

Grade 12/matric pass in which the learner's grades are high enough to be eligible for university entrance.

COHORT

A group of learners who work through a curriculum together; for example, a group of learners who begin Grade 1 in the same year and finish school together in Grade 12, would be part of the same cohort.

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.

FURTHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING (FET)

The band or level of education in the NQF that comprises Grades 10, 11 and 12; some occupation-orientated and technical education and training offered at TVET colleges is also included in this band.

TRUE MATRIC PASS RATE

The percentage of learners from the original Grade 1 cohort who sit and pass matric twelve years later.

NATIONAL MATRIC PASS RATE

The percentage of learners who sit the matric exam and pass - including grade repeaters but excluding those who drop out.

OUT-OF-SCHOOL YOUTH

Children in the official school-age range who are not enrolled in either primary or secondary schools.

POLICY ON PROGRESSION

A learner may only be retained once in the FET phase in order to prevent the learner from spending more than four years in a phase. This implies that a learner who fails a grade for the second time, cannot be retained in the grade, but must be allowed to progress to the next grade. However, such a learner at the end of Grade 12, must satisfy all the requirements of the NSC in order to be awarded the matric certificate.

QUINTILE

South African schools are divided into quintiles based on the socio-economic profile of the community in which they are located. Quintile 1 schools are located in the poorest communities, while Quintile 5 schools are in the wealthiest. Funding allocations differ across quintiles. Learners in Quintiles 1-3 do not have to pay school fees.

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

ARC	Action Research Committee
DBE	Department of Basic Education
DDD	Data Driven Districts
ECD	Early Childhood Development
FET	Further Education and Training
GET	General Education and Training
KDG	Khula Development Group
NATED	National Accredited Technical Education Diploma
NC(V)	National Certificate Vocational
NEET	Not in Education, Employment or Training
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
NLF	New Leaders Foundation
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
NQF4	National Qualifications Framework Level 4
NSC	National Senior Certificate (also known as a matric certificate)
MDO	Masibumbane Development Organisation
PED	Provincial Education Department
PED EMIS	Provincial Education Department Education Management Information System
PIRLS	Progress in Reading Literacy Study
ReSEP	Research on Socio-Economic Policy
SA-SAMS	South African Schools Administration and Management System
SAQA	South African Qualifications Authority
SBST	School Based Support Team
SGB	School Governing Body
TaRL	Teaching at the Right Level
TVET	Technical Vocational Education and Training College

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!**

JOHN D. VOLMINK

FORE-WORD

At the dawn of democracy, achieving 'education for all' became central to transforming South African society. Unsurprisingly, since 1994, we have seen more and more learners enrolling for school at the earliest grades. But, the fact that most children enter school has not yet led to most children *finishing school*. In fact, of the more than one million learners who enter Grade 1 every year, 400 000 will have dropped out of school before they reach Grade 12 (matric). This is a serious problem.

From the start, it was imagined that post-apartheid education would help us achieve a particular vision of the 'new' South Africa: a prosperous, united, democratic and globally-competitive country; with literate, creative and critical citizens; each of them leading productive, self-fulfilled lives - free of violence, discrimination and prejudice. With this vision in mind, the school curriculum was designed so that most learners would meet the minimum standards to finish school. And yet, 40% of learners are not able to overcome the barriers that keep them from reaching matric, and ultimately reaching their dreams.¹

Some of these barriers are about the education system itself, including policy issues, overcrowded classrooms, and an

over-focus on passing tests and exams, rather than whether learners have grasped what they've been taught. Other barriers are social and economic, such as a lack of family and community support, or learners growing up in contexts of poverty, crime, violence and trauma.

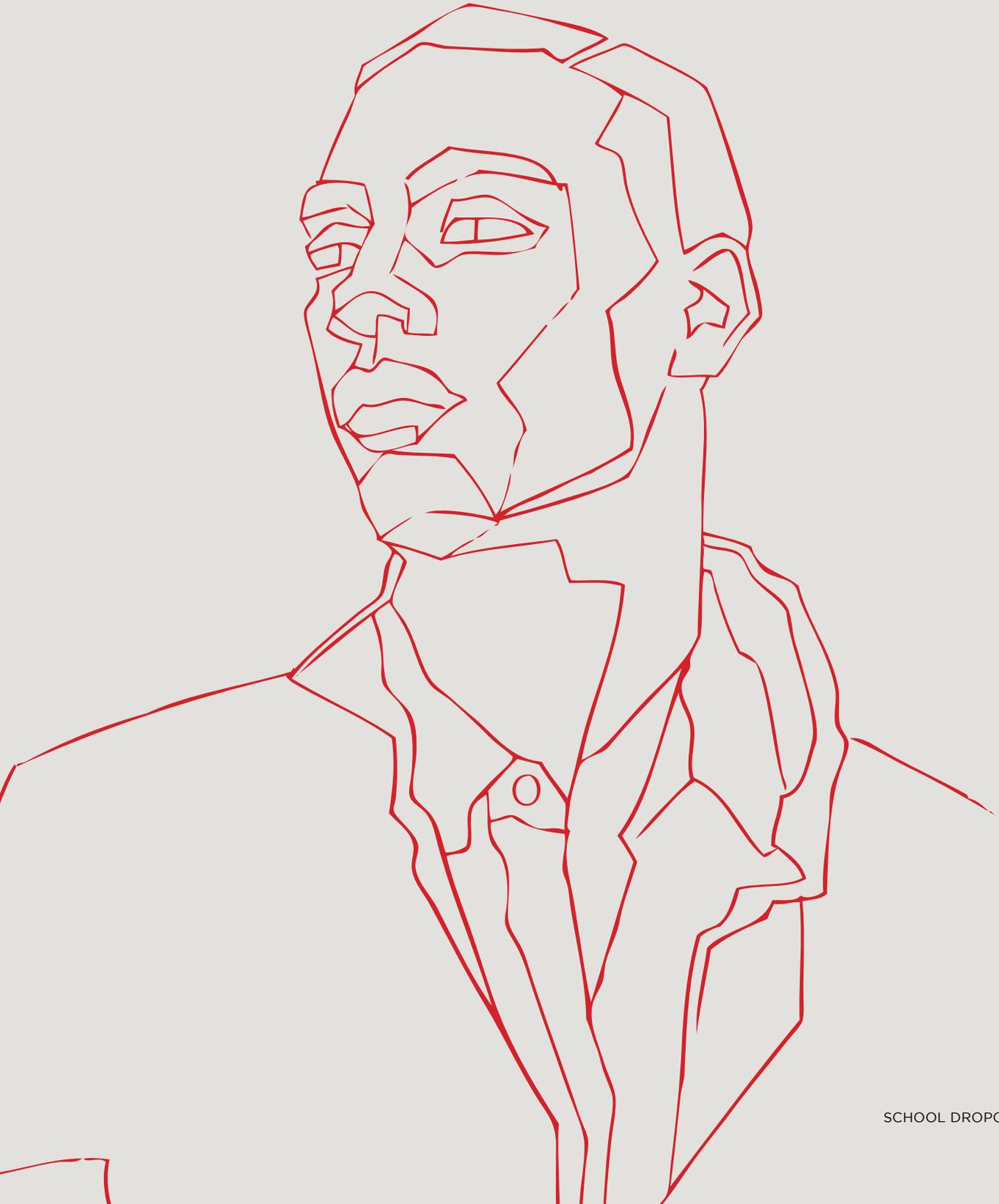
At the end of the day, most learners drop out of school not because of a 'poverty of aspiration', but because of a 'poverty of opportunity'.

To tackle dropout, we must create a learning environment that nurtures caring relationships, while also building learners' self-esteem, character and resilience. Young people must also be given the platform to develop the knowledge and skills necessary for navigating their present and future worlds.

Every time a learner drops out of school, it impacts the fabric of our society. Yet another citizen will find it more difficult to participate meaningfully in the choices that affect their lives, to be a self-managing person, or to participate fully in the economy.

Our future will be determined by the extent to which we can address this pressing South African challenge. This is not just about supporting learners to finish school, it is about nation building. It is about ensuring a just, truly transformed and admirable society.

At the end of the day, most learners drop out of school not because of a 'poverty of aspiration', but because of a 'poverty of opportunity'.



KOFI ANNAN

former UN Secretary General, 1997

*“Knowledge is power. Information is liberating.
Education is the premise of progress, in every
society, in every family.”*

SPOTLIGHT ON DROP- OUT



Looking at the wide-eyed faces in a Grade 1 classroom, it's hard to believe that 40% won't even reach Grade 12 (matric).² Despite our success in enrolling almost every South African child in primary school,³ we struggle to keep them in school until matric. With so much attention on annual matric pass rates, this major failure of our education system is often hidden. And although we may not recognise it, school dropout affects us all.

“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.

M

ore than 16% of South Africa's government budget is invested in basic education.⁴ Yet, the average South African child will only complete 9.3 years of schooling.⁵ In the poorest schools, this translates to 5.1 years of actual learning.⁶ What impact does this have on the futures of young people, and on the country more broadly?

In South Africa, one in three young people (aged 15-24) – that's 3.4 million people – are not in any type of education, employment, or training (NEETs). Among them, 2.6 million have not finished Grade 12.⁷

Without finishing matric, or another NQF4 qualification,⁸ young people have very few career or livelihood options. Those who drop out are often already disadvantaged by their home circumstances.⁹ Young people without a matric are at highest risk of unemployment and stay unemployed longer than their peers. Those who do find work are also more likely to be in low-paid, unskilled jobs.

Nearly 40% of South Africans are between the ages of 15 and 35. Our youth could either be a great asset to the country; or threaten its social and economic fabric.¹⁰ This will depend on their ability to realise their potential through education and work opportunities.

For all South Africans to thrive, every child must be given the best chance – not only of making it through school, but also of finishing school with the knowledge, skills and abilities to contribute to society. The reality, however, is that eight out of ten Grade 4 learners are unable to read for meaning, in either English or their home language.¹¹ Meanwhile, two out of three Grade 9 learners cannot do basic calculations, match tables to bar graphs, or read a simple line graph.¹²

There is also deep inequality in our education system, which shapes how it performs. Take Maths scores, for example: in (wealthy) private schools, 80% of Grade 8 and 9 learners score above the minimum level of ability. This drops to 60% of learners in public fee-paying schools; while in public no-fee schools (i.e. the poorest schools), only 20% of learners achieve the minimum standards.¹³ Unable to understand what they are reading or carry out basic calculations, it's no surprise then that many learners lose motivation long before they even reach matric.

In South Africa, dropout rates differ significantly by race. Black African and Coloured youth are half as likely to complete matric as White and Indian youth.¹⁴ Young coloured men seem at highest risk of dropping out: one survey showed that 29% of 16–18-year-old coloured men were not in school.¹⁵ However, across genders, it is black youth who have the highest rates of dropout. This is despite staying in school for longer, repeating more grades, and leaving school at an older age.¹⁶

Different races have different dropout rates because of how South Africa's education system, as well as its towns and cities, were planned under apartheid – giving white people privileged access to quality schools and city infrastructure. This planning still has an effect today, deepening racial inequality and making it more difficult for historically-disadvantaged youth to access jobs and incomes that could lift them out of poverty.

Tackling school dropout means keeping learners in school and opening up pathways to employment. But it also goes beyond this: schooling prepares learners for life – building their empathy, imagination and critical thinking. Not every child in South Africa will have the benefit of post-school education. As such, schooling remains one of the most important ways to develop and support our citizens.

When a young person drops out of school, the effects go beyond the individual learner, deepening poverty and unemployment. This makes it less likely that the economy will grow, or that South Africans will experience stability and togetherness.

School dropout is an urgent socio-economic challenge for our country. We need a unified, thoughtful way of tackling it. This publication offers a deeper understanding of the nature and drivers of school dropout in South Africa – drawing together the latest research, as well as on-the-ground experience from learners, educators and programmers. We hope it adds to a society-wide response to dropout, ensuring that every child receives the benefit of quality schooling, and is able to achieve their full potential.

In this publication, you'll find an overview of school dropout in South Africa, as well as its impact on learners, and the future of the country; a discussion unpacking the factors that either 'pull' or 'push' learners out of school and an outline of existing, effective interventions and simple steps we can all take to help learners stay in school.

NOTE: Wherever differing data estimates were encountered in the development of this publication, the most comprehensive and/or recent data source was selected.

SCHOOL QUINTILES IN SOUTH AFRICA

South African schools are divided into 'quintiles' based on the social and economic wellbeing of their surrounding community: Quintile 1 schools are based in the poorest communities, while Quintile 5 schools are in the wealthiest. The amount of funding a school receives differs between quintiles. Learners in Quintiles 1-3 do not have to pay school fees (over 70% of government schools do not charge fees in South Africa).¹⁷

So why do learners say a "lack of money" prevents them from going to school?¹⁸ This is because of the many other costs that come with schooling, including transport, uniforms, stationery, and sanitary pads for girls.¹⁹ After food, school-related costs are the biggest childcare expense for mothers receiving a child-support grant.²⁰

A 2013 study found that eliminating school fees without reducing other education-related expenses would have limited impact on learners enrolling in or completing school.²¹

AT A GLANCE

NEETS IN SOUTH AFRICA

NEETS (Not in Education, Employment or Training) refer to youth not participating in any form of education, employment or training opportunity.

10.4 MILLION
YOUNG PEOPLE
(AGED 15-24) LIVE IN
SOUTH AFRICA^a



3.4 MILLION

YOUTH (AGED 15-24) ARE NOT IN
EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT OR
TRAINING (NEET)^c

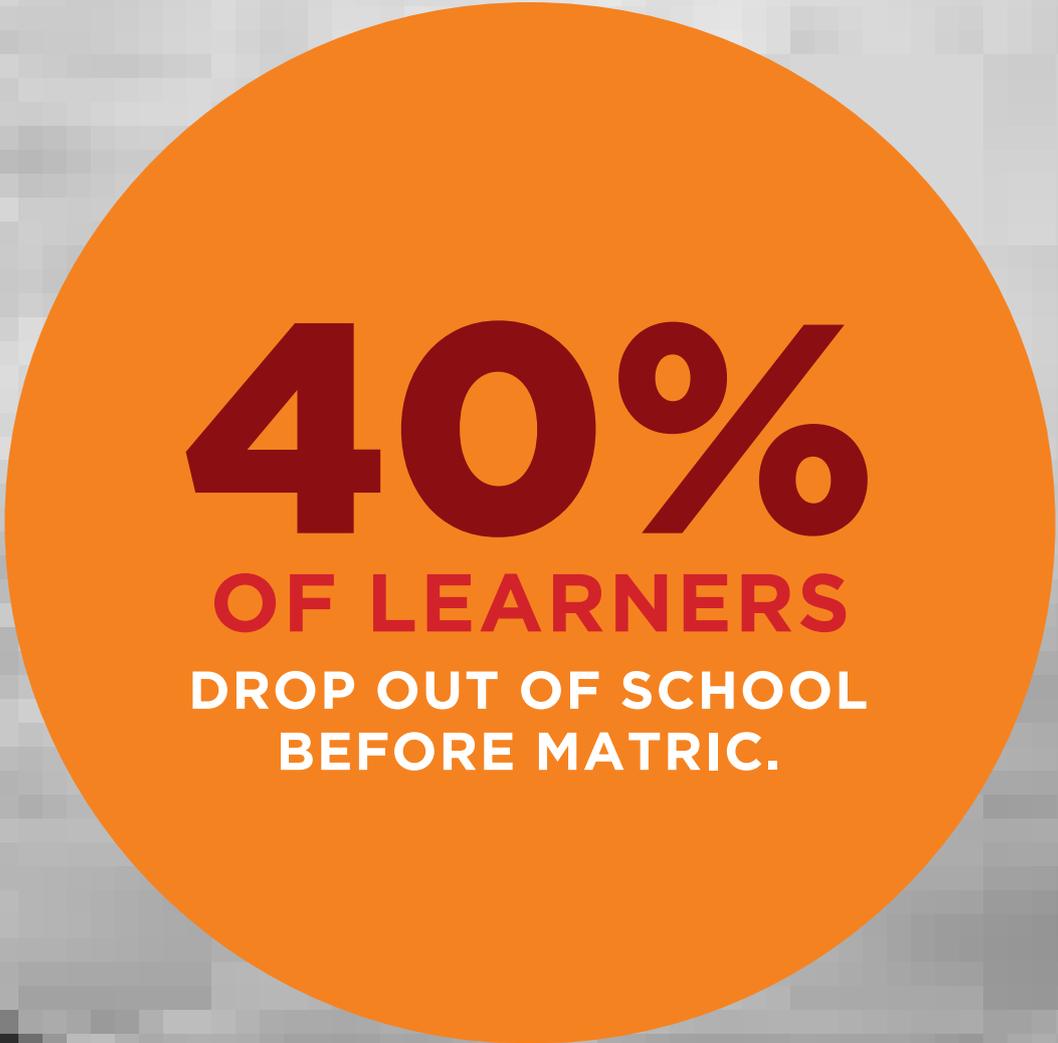


2.6 MILLION

OF THOSE NEETS
DO NOT HAVE A MATRIC^d

SOURCES: a. Statistics South Africa. 2018. Mid-year population estimates 2018; b. Statistics South Africa. 2018. General Household Survey 2017; c. The Department of Higher Education and Training. 2017. Fact Sheet on NEETS; d. Ibid.





40%

**OF LEARNERS
DROP OUT OF SCHOOL
BEFORE MATRIC.**

SECTION

1

UNDER- STANDING DROPOUT: THE COST OF SCHOOL DROPOUT



NELSON MANDELA

South Africa's First Democratic President, 2001

*“No country can really develop unless
its citizens are educated.”*

KNOW THIS

1 While almost every South African child starts school, less than half will get a matric in their lifetime.

2 A matric certificate or NQF4 qualification is an essential passport to further education and training opportunities, which improve a person's chances of employment and their expected income.

3 An under-educated population threatens South Africa's social and economic potential, not just the potential of individual learners.



LANCE*, 17, Bonteheuwel, Cape Town, dropped out of school in Grade 10:

“The highest grade I finished was Grade 9, and you can’t get many opportunities with that... So, I’m a bit nervous when it comes to finding work. I see myself cleaning the streets, if I’m lucky, and then working up from that.”

ON ITS OWN, FINISHING MATRIC DOES NOT HUGELY INCREASE ONE'S CHANCES OF GETTING A JOB. BUT, HAVING A MATRIC STILL MATTERS WHEN IT COMES TO:



CHANCES OF FURTHER EDUCATION

Without a matric, young people cannot access further education and training, which remain the most likely path to employment and a higher-income job. Among young people without a matric, only 1% have some other school certificate or diploma (from a TVET college, for example).²² TVET enrolment is low because, unlike university degrees, TVET qualifications are not believed to improve one's chances of employment.^{23, 24} Research shows that, rather than acting as an alternative to matric, TVETs have become ways for young people who already have a matric to bide time, before qualifying for university or finding a job.^{25, 26, 27}



CHANCES FOR SKILLED AND SECURE EMPLOYMENT

Without a matric, job-seekers are unlikely to qualify for skilled jobs.²⁸ Moreover, workers with a matric qualification (or higher) are twice as likely to have permanent employment contracts.²⁹



CHANCES FOR HIGHER-PAYING JOBS

Learners who complete matric earn about 39% more than those who don't.³⁰ In a 2007 study, this income tripled for those with a degree.³¹

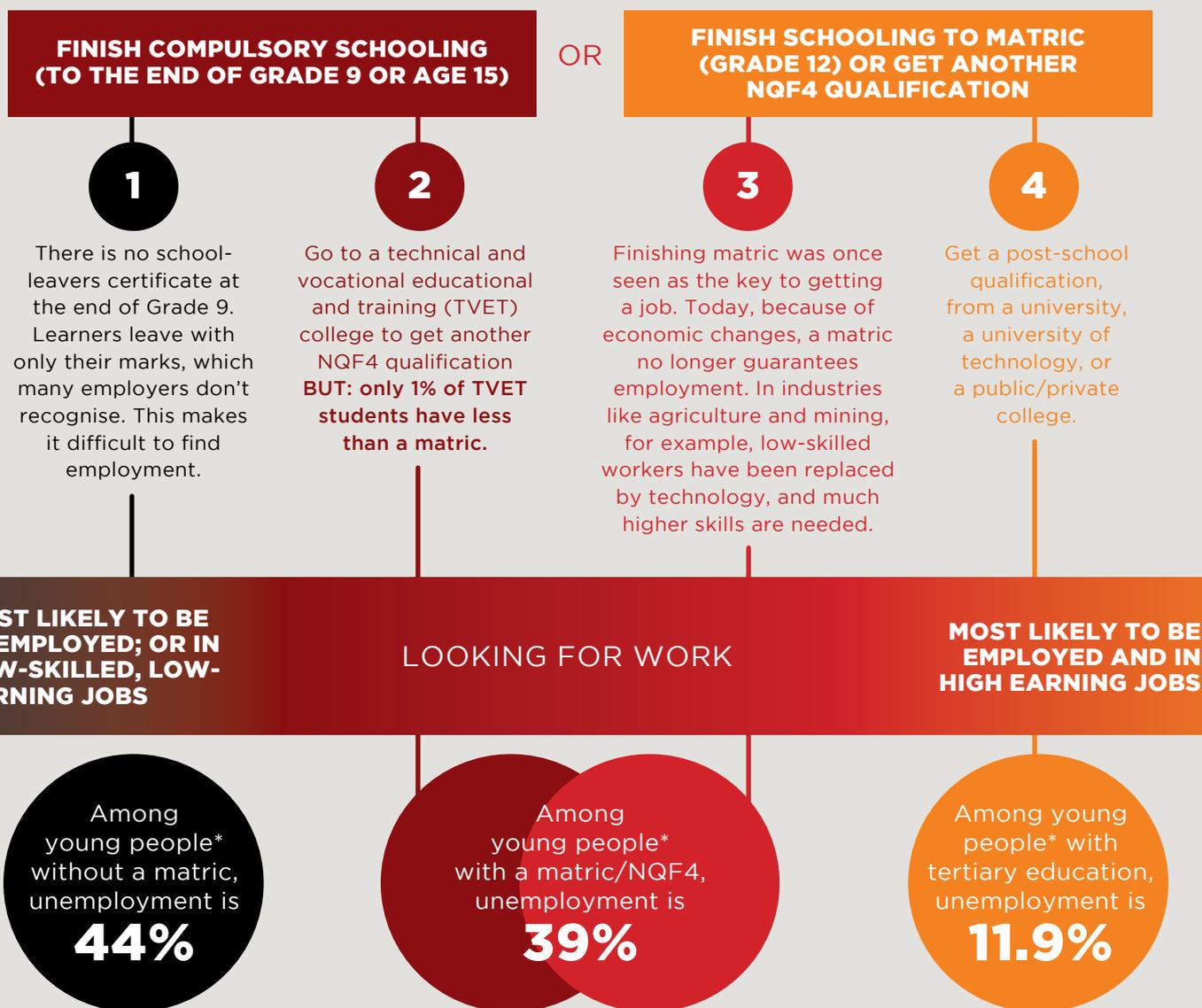


EDUCATION-TO-EMPLOYMENT OPTIONS

Completing a matric drastically improves young people's chances of enrolling in post-school education, which in turn makes them far more employable. Among young people with a tertiary education, unemployment is as low as 11.9%.³²

THE IMPORTANCE OF MATRIC: THE EDUCATION-TO-OPPORTUNITY PATHWAY

For a long time, education has been seen as the pathway to success, but not all pathways are equally accessible. For young people in South Africa, there are usually four pathways from schooling to employment:



*Aged 15-34

SOURCES: Statistics South Africa. 2018. Quarterly Labour Force Survey

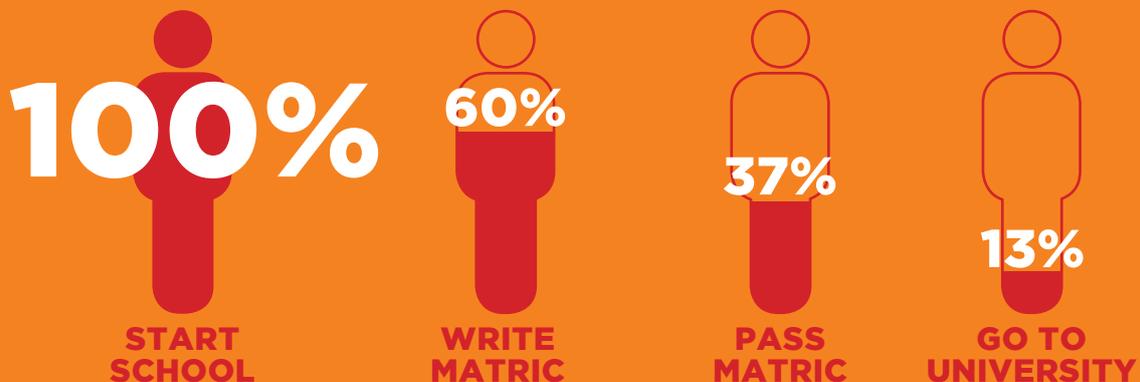
THE TRUE MATRIC PASS RATE

While the overall matric pass rate has improved over time from 58% in 1994 to 78% in 2018,³³ this doesn't tell us anything about how many learners actually make it to matric.

This is because the national matric pass rate only tells us the percentage of learners who sit the exam and pass. It does not tell us what percentage of learners, who started Grade 1 twelve years earlier, made it to matric and passed. This would be the 'true' or 'real' matric pass rate. The annual national matric pass rate does not consider those learners who dropped out of school before or during Grade 12, or grade repeaters, i.e. learners who were not part of the original cohort, but who write the exam.

When these numbers are considered, the true pass rate is much lower than the national one. Around 40% of learners drop out before they even reach Grade 12 (see *below*). Of those who do make it to matric to write their final exams, just 13% of learners pass well enough to go on to university (Bachelor pass).³⁴

TRUE MATRIC PASS RATE OF THE 2008 MATRIC COHORT (% OF GRADE 1 LEARNERS WHO MAKE IT TO GRADE 12 AND BEYOND)



SOURCE: Spaul, N. Adapted from 'Important research inputs on #FeesMustFall'. Available at <https://nicspaul.com/2016/09/29/important-research-inputs-on-feesmustfall/>



Between 2008 and 2010,
learners two years older than the
recommended age for their grade were

**24 PERCENTAGE
POINTS**

**MORE LIKELY TO HAVE
DROPPED OUT*.**

* National Income Dynamics Survey (NIDS)

SECTION

2

WHO IS DROPPING OUT OF SCHOOL AND WHY?



AFRICAN PROVERB

*“What you help a child to love
can be more important than what
you help him to learn.”*

KNOW THIS

- 1** We should think of dropout as a process, not a single event; and this should inform how we respond to it. Learner disengagement can start very early in a child's school career, even before they set foot in a classroom.
- 2** Despite what people might think, youth who drop out of school have often been very committed to their schooling. Their dropping out usually comes after years of struggle.
- 3** To understand and respond to dropout effectively, we must understand both the factors that **push** young people out of school (i.e. the school environment), and the factors **pulling** them away (which often include individual, family and community circumstances).
- 4** Falling behind in school is one of the strongest predictors of dropout: learners who repeat grades are much more likely to drop out. It is important to keep learners on track throughout their school careers, and to start strong in the first few years.

RESEARCH SHOWS THAT SCHOOL DROPOUT IS RARELY ABOUT A SINGLE EVENT. INSTEAD, IT COMES AT THE END OF A LONG JOURNEY, IN WHICH THE LEARNER HAS BEEN INCREASINGLY PUSHED OR PULLED AWAY FROM SCHOOL.

Reasons³⁵ for dropout are often multi-layered, extending beyond the individual learner, into their families, schools and communities. In this section we explore how these different layers of influence – individual, family, school and community – affect learners’ journey through school. Throughout, we use case studies and opinion pieces to show how we might support learners, at these different levels, safeguarding them to matric.

See Appendix II on page 72 for a list of the NPOs in these case studies.



MXOLISI*, Grade 12, Gonubie, East London:

“Having someone check on you daily at school makes you feel loved and supported; like someone believes you can do well at school. This is not always the feeling we get at home – I was smoking and drinking to forget this but now someone checks on me.”

A / INDIVIDUAL FACTORS

A learner's gender can shape his/her pathway through school. While boys and girls are equally likely to start school in South Africa, moving through the school system seems more difficult for boys, who repeat grades more often than girls, and drop out in higher numbers.^{36, 37, 38} The reasons why boys and girls leave school are also different. Boys who drop out are often falling behind in class, have lost interest in school, or have stopped seeing its value.³⁹ Meanwhile, 33% of girls who drop out are either pregnant⁴⁰ or caring for children.⁴¹

If a learner has a disability, this can also severely impact their school experience. In 2013, young people (aged 16-19) with (physical and learning) disabilities were nearly twice as likely to be out of school than their peers.⁴² To add to this, 17% of South Africa's children and adolescents are living with mental disorders,⁴³ making it more likely they will struggle with their classwork.⁴⁴ Whether because they are under-resourced or under-committed, many schools do not properly cater for learners with physical, mental or learning disabilities. This makes school an unsupportive and sometimes unsafe environment for these learners.

Disability is one of many reasons learners can start to lag behind, which is a primary cause of dropout. Learners who repeat grades, and are therefore older than their classmates, are at much higher risk of dropping out of school.⁴⁵ This is not only because of the stigma of failing, but also because older learners are often under greater pressure to earn an income.⁴⁶

For some learners, disability or gender can add to a number of other factors which, from the moment they are born, make them less likely to finish school. These factors might include their race or socio-economic background. What's worse is that all of these are beyond the learners' control.

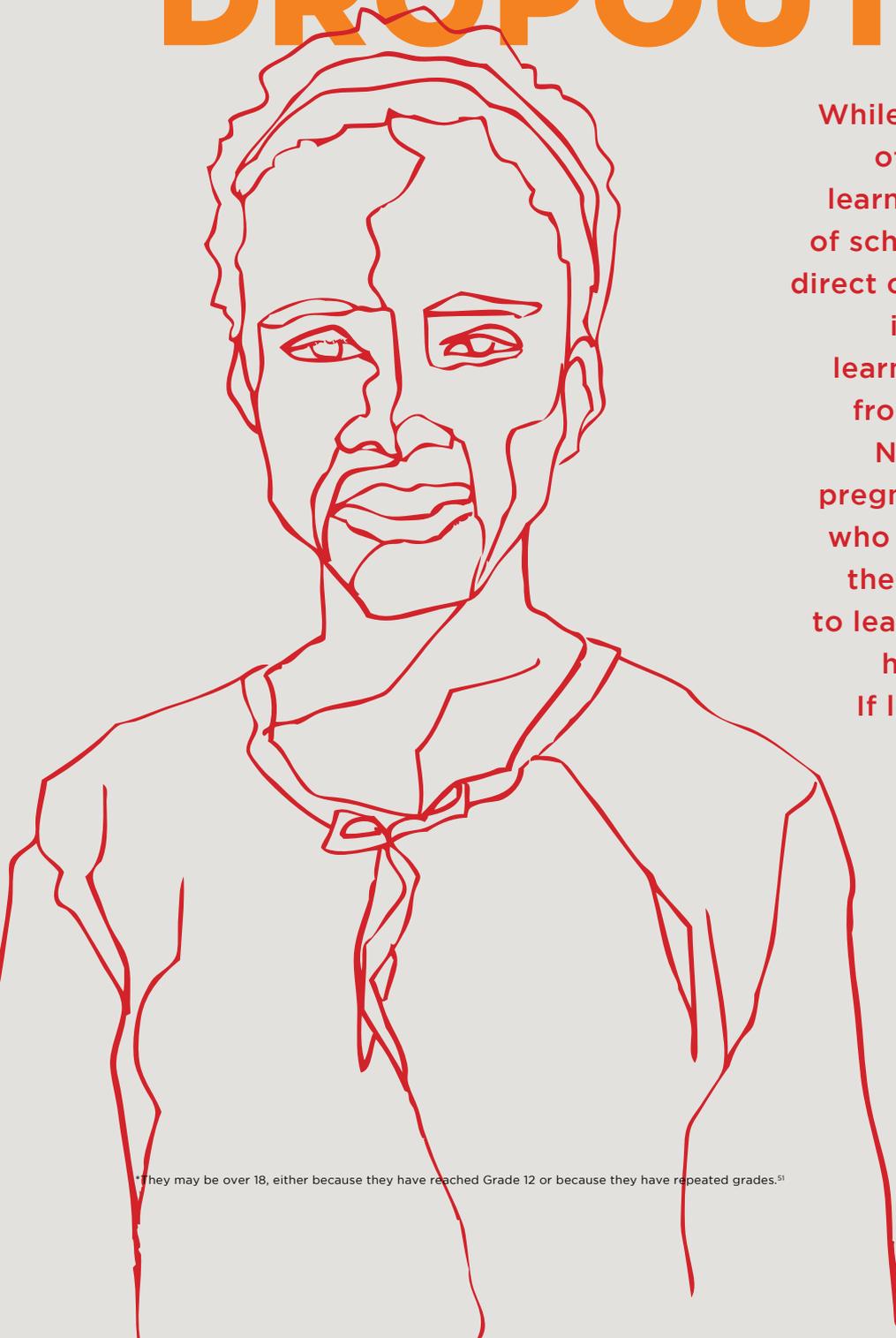
Furthermore, whether they are falling behind or not, many young people lose faith in the value of school, which makes their dropping out more likely.⁴⁷ It also makes them more vulnerable to alcohol and drug abuse, as well as to gangs, which offer an alternative source of belonging, self-esteem and livelihood – and further the risk of dropout.



AMY-LEE*, Grade 12, Mitchells Plain, Cape Town:

“A few weeks after the rape, I found out I was pregnant. May the Lord forgive me, but I realised I couldn't keep this child. I have goals to own a funeral company one day (I have enjoyed learning about this job from my father, who is also a part-time undertaker). It's part of my 10-year plan to do nursing right after school, then a few business courses and then start my company, so I need to get my matric. I decided to travel to a clinic by myself to get an abortion.”

PREGNANCY AND DROPOUT



While pregnancy might be one of the main reasons female learners give for dropping out of school, it is not necessarily a direct cause of dropout. Instead, it might be a sign that the learner has been pulling away from school for some time.⁴⁸ Not every learner who falls pregnant drops out.⁴⁹ Learners who are primary caregivers to their children are more likely to leave school than those who have help with childcare.⁵⁰ If learners are older than 18* when they fall pregnant, they are also more likely to drop out than their younger peers.

*They may be over 18, either because they have reached Grade 12 or because they have repeated grades.⁵¹

MALIBONGWE NKUNKUMA (24) completed most of his schooling in Nyanga, an informal settlement in Cape Town. Determined to change his life, he was the top-performing matriculant at his high school, and went on to get a Bachelor degree in Sociology & Public Policy, followed by an Honours degree in Public Policy at the University of Cape Town.

Growing up, I went to six different schools in three different provinces. Although there was no stability in my life, I managed to pass every grade. School gave me an alternative to my reality at home, which was a mess. At school, I knew I could be a top student. Passing a grade gave me the feeling I was going somewhere in life.

My mother moved to Gauteng to look for work after she was retrenched from her job as a seamstress in Cape Town. This is where I started Grade 1, but I soon dropped out because the school was too far away from my home and I didn't have anyone to take me there. A year later, I moved to Idutywa in the Eastern Cape to live with my grandmother, who was the first person to tell me I had potential. My Grade 1 teacher there laid the foundation for me to excel in English.

Two years later, I moved to Cape Town, to be with my father. He moved back to the Eastern Cape the following year to live with his wife and children, which was devastating. So, I moved in with my

**“STAYING
IN SCHOOL
DESPITE
THE ODDS”**

aunt and attended Vukani Primary School in Lower Crossroads, Nyanga. My aunt's husband would always say to me, "You know, you can be anything you want in life". There were others who would also say I could become a lawyer or doctor. I used to think, "Don't tell me I can be something you couldn't be; something that isn't close to home". But they saw something in me. They showed me I could be something they never had the opportunities to become.

At the end of 2005, I received a small Sekunjalo Bursary. I was living with my mother and siblings at the time and attending Sikelela Imizamo Yethu Primary School in Crossroads. My mother was so proud of me. Just three months later, she passed away. Her last words to my sister were,

"Malibongwe has shown he has potential. I have faith in him," and she instructed my sister, who was just 24 at the time, to look after me. A few months later, my brother was murdered. That was the hardest year for us. My sister was alone. She had no money but had to look after us. Somehow we managed.

In 2007, I moved to Qingqa-Mntwana Primary School in Nyanga, for Grades 6 to 9. It was the best primary school I went to. It was very organised and we had extracurricular activities, like choir and debate team. There I developed a close-knit group of three friends. We all came from broken families, but we were the strongest learners in our grade, and continued to be so through Grades 10 and 11 at Sinethemba High School in Philippi. One member of our group started struggling with his studies in Grade 11. We did whatever we could do to bring him back to our study group, but he didn't come back. While he eventually got his higher certificate (NQF5) and is now working as a sales agent, I believe he could still get his matric and go even further in life.

A lot of people dropped out of matric. The thing about people who drop out is that if they're not close to you, there's not much you can do for them. In high school, you're dealing with young adults – people who already have a sense of identity, so it's hard to change them. I believed in school. School was never somewhere I felt I had to be; in fact, not being at school was just not an option for me. I always wanted an education – there was no alternative! I didn't want to end up with nothing, because I knew what nothing meant: a life of hardship.

B FAMILY FACTORS

Many young people in South Africa come from unstable or disrupted homes, where they may not receive enough, or any, emotional support from a parent or caregiver to help build their academic confidence, motivation, and sense of self-worth. There are several reasons that South African caregivers may not be able to fully engage in their children's education. They might be working away from home, too busy with the challenges of day-to-day life, or, in some cases, no longer alive. According to one survey, 10% of out-of-school youth in South Africa had left school after a death in the family, suggesting there might not be enough support for youth dealing with these types of 'shocks'.⁵²

Whether or not a learner's parents are educated also has a strong impact on how well they do in school.⁵³ In many of South Africa's most disadvantaged homes, learners' parents, grandparents and great-grandparents would have received limited, and often low-quality, apartheid education.⁵⁴ While parents often care deeply about their children's schooling and want to help, many feel too intimidated, disempowered, and unfamiliar with their children's schoolwork to get involved.⁵⁵ Youth from poorer households may also face

pressure to leave school early and support their families, either by finding a job or caring for relatives.

Having at least one caring, supportive adult is critical to a learner's academic potential and their ability to navigate the day-to-day challenges that might affect their school performance.⁵⁶

Caregivers can play an essential role in a child's school career – whether they are the child's biological parents or not. In South Africa, only a quarter of all children live in strictly nuclear households (consisting only of children and their biological parents). Many (36%) are cared for by grandparents and/or extended family.⁵⁷ Caregivers can support their children by interacting regularly and positively with their school and its teachers. They should also feel empowered to confront the challenges their children are facing at school, advocating for learners to be supported and protected. Most importantly, caregivers should engage as much as possible with their child's education, encouraging them in their schoolwork, offering practical tips, and asking about their school day.



NTOKOZO*, Grade 10, Richmond, KZN:

“I live with my grandmother. She is depending on me to do well at school and take care of my family and young ones. Our parents died, so it is hard, it is pressure because already I have failed this grade – I hope to make it this year.”

THE CRITICAL ROLE OF A CARING, SUPPORTIVE ADULT

Some learners stay in and do well at school, despite challenging circumstances. Researchers studying their resilience have found that these youth often succeed because they have “personal anchors – stable, positive emotional relationships with at least one parent or key person.”⁵⁸ The following NGOs have found that making a difference in the home environment, through learners’ primary caregivers, can be an effective starting point to keep learners in school.

CHECK & CONNECT

The principal of a local high school in Mdantsane referred Vince*, a 20-year-old Grade 11 learner showing behavioural problems, to Sarah Ngantweni, a mentor at Masibumbane Development Organisation (MDO). This was unusual, since MDO usually works with Grade 8 and 9 learners. Through her counselling sessions with Vince, Sarah learnt he was smoking dagga, and that he was fighting so badly with his mother and stepfather, that he preferred sleeping outdoors in the bushes to staying at home. To try and improve the situation, Sarah visited Vince’s parents and counselled the family. Sarah helped Vince’s parents to take an interest in his education, and communicated with his teachers about his progress. Because of this, Vince returned home and focused on his schoolwork. His teachers noticed that he was more committed to his work and commented on the positive change in his appearance too. With Vince’s parents doing their part to support his schooling at home, his teachers are now responsible for making sure he gets the help he needs at school (see page 43 for more about MDO’s ‘Check & Connect’ programme).

DROPOUT CATCHERS

Shaun* is a Grade 7 learner at a school in Paarl. His teacher asked the Khula Development Group (KDG) ‘Dropout Catchers’ to check up on him as he was often absent. ‘Dropout Catchers’ are community-based women who form part of KDG’s programme. Teachers flag learners who’ve missed school for three days or more. The ‘Dropout Catchers’ then follow them up, usually by visiting the child’s home, discovering why they have been missing school, and assisting caregivers to ensure they return. In Shaun’s case, the home visit revealed that his mother had gone to fetch a social grant two months earlier, but had never returned. Shaun and his teenage brother were living alone in a small shack where, for two months, nobody took care of them. Struggling to meet their basic needs, the boys dropped out of school, even though Shaun could have received a daily meal through the school’s feeding scheme. KDG got the Department of Social Development involved and persuaded the boys’ father to take care of them. Because of this action, Shaun returned to school and has been connected to several state services to make sure his needs are taken care of.

* Name has been changed.

C / SCHOOL FACTORS

School culture in which there is bullying or physical punishment, or teachers are absent from class, can push learners away from school. To add to this, many South African school buildings are poorly maintained, under-resourced, and inadequately serviced. Vandalism,⁵⁹ litter, overcrowded classrooms, or classrooms with missing doors and windows, can make school an unpleasant, even dangerous space to be in.

On the other hand, well-run and maintained schools can greatly improve children's chances of success, even if they are disadvantaged by their home environments. Ideal schools should be sanctuaries of learning, curiosity, stimulation and safety; in which teachers are skilled, motivated and supported. Just like in the home, having caring, attentive adults at school can help struggling or vulnerable learners push on with their schooling.

Quality teachers are essential to keeping learners engaged. While most teachers in South Africa are well qualified, some do not have the skills or knowledge they need to teach properly.⁶⁰ Other educators simply feel too overwhelmed by large class sizes, in which many learners are already lagging behind by the time they teach them.⁶¹ Unfortunately, the South African schooling system also struggles with teachers not showing up for class, arriving late, and not spending enough time teaching, all of which affect children's ability to learn.⁶² Quality teachers should be recognised for improving their learners' academic performance, paying attention to their attendance, and identifying those in need of support. More so, teaching should be regarded as a noble and prestigious profession.

Given that curriculum changes take time, teachers must make the existing curriculum interesting and relevant to learners' daily lives, in order to keep them engaged. Their curriculum should develop curiosity, creativity, empathy, and imagination – skills that will help learners better navigate the world.

KEEPING LEARNERS ON TRACK

Falling behind in school makes it much more likely that learners will drop out. One of the essential roles for schools is to keep learners on track academically. This should start within the first few years of primary school, when the foundations for learning are set.

Without the basic tools to understand what is being taught, further learning cannot take place and it becomes very difficult for learners to progress through the curriculum.⁶³

In 2016, an international study revealed that about 78% of South Africa's Grade 4 learners cannot read for meaning, in either English or their home language.⁶⁴ We must spot these learning gaps early on, and create programmes to support those being left behind. Left unchecked, these gaps become so large that it is nearly impossible for learners to catch up.

TEACHING AT THE RIGHT LEVEL

More and more, research from across the world is showing us that when learners are taught ‘at the right level’, it has a strong impact on their academic success.⁶⁵ Programmes that use this approach – also known as ‘catch-up’ or ‘targeted instruction’ – work best when they focus on basic foundational skills, such as reading and Maths, especially among Grade 3-5 learners.

Pioneered by Indian NGO Pratham, the ‘Teaching at the Right Level’ (TaRL) approach is based on the understanding that children in countries like India, are often several grade levels below where they are expected to be.⁶⁶ The approach works by:

1. **Assessing and regrouping learners based on their reading ability;**
2. **Training teachers to focus on the child’s learning level;**
3. **Supplying appropriate material (especially for basic skills like reading); and**
4. **Creating strong systems to ensure high-quality teaching and learning.**⁶⁷

There are different ways to run a catch-up programme: during school hours, after school, or during school holidays, for example. Teaching could be done by low-cost tutors, volunteers, school teachers, or even using computers. Catch-up programmes can be adapted for specific learners, classes and communities. They work best if they are well matched to government goals; and where strong training, mentoring, monitoring and leadership is in place.⁶⁸

Zambia’s use of TaRL is a good example of how the approach can be locally adapted and brought into the existing education system. In 2016/2017, a national assessment in Zambia showed that nearly one in seven Grade 2 learners could not read a single word

in their local language. Meanwhile, 30% of Grade 5 learners were illiterate with poor Maths skills.⁶⁹ Following this, the Ministry of Basic Education worked with several partners⁷⁰ to pilot a ‘Catch Up’ project in 80 schools. Through the pilot, the Ministry was able to identify the best approach for the Zambian system. The programme would run for one hour during the school day for two terms. Teachers would regroup children in Grades 3, 4 and 5 based on their literacy and numeracy skills, instead of their age or grade.⁷¹ Following the success of the pilot, the Ministry has scaled up its ‘Catch Up’ project to be rolled out in 1 800 schools by 2020.

In July 2019, the Zero Dropout campaign piloted an accelerated catch-up reading programme based on the TaRL methodology in Paarl and East London. The Reading for Meaning project successfully trained 32 volunteers as Reader Leaders who ran TaRL literacy sessions with groups of learners. One hundred and eleven (111) learners in East London and 97 learners in Paarl benefitted from the programme. Though the pilot objective was to test the mechanics and concept of the project, the learners’ progress was noteworthy. After only 15 sessions more than half of the learners were reading at a higher reading level than their initial baseline assessment. The project will scale up its work in 2020 adding more beneficiary schools.

Because many South African teachers struggle to evaluate their learners work properly, whether a learner progresses or repeats their grade sometimes has little to do with their actual abilities. Instead, some students unnecessarily repeat grades or are discouraged from continuing school because teachers under-estimated their abilities.⁷² In other cases, learners might progress to the next grade before they should, because teachers over-estimate their readiness.

After Grade 7, the number of learners repeating grades nearly doubles.⁷³ This illustrates how gaps in foundational learning can catch up to learners in later grades. But it also raises questions about whether schools are deliberately holding back learners who are unlikely to pass the matric exam. This helps them meet the pass rate targets set by provincial education departments.⁷⁴

To prevent learners from repeating the same grades multiple times, the Department of Education introduced a policy that a learner can only be kept back once in each school phase (Foundation Phase, Intermediate Phase, Senior Phase, and FET) – even if they do not meet the academic standards to pass the grade.⁷⁵

Whether it's holding back learners to protect pass rates, or pushing them through to meet policy requirements; decisions about learners' repeating grades may have little to do with supporting or catching-up learners academically,

which means many continue to lag behind — and are more likely to drop out.

To keep learners on track and engaged in school, those falling behind should be identified and supported quickly, using helpful assessment and regular tracking. We talk about this more in Section 3.

But, of course, schoolwork may not be the only reason learners pull away from school. They could be facing family pressures, personal traumas, or feelings of depression and hopelessness. At the moment, large class sizes, teacher shortages, and poor teacher training, have made it difficult to identify, guide and support learners at risk of dropout. To address this, some schools and NGOs have introduced tutoring, peer support, teacher training, and better school leadership, and have seen positive results (*see the case studies on pages 38 and 42*).



MRS. MADUBEDUBE*, grandmother of a learner who attended the Reading for Meaning programme in East London:

“... he would bring home stories he was reading in the programme and would want to read to everyone. I then realised that he is gaining confidence to read and I was so happy to see that. I started making follow up with the Reading for Meaning team to do random checks on his behaviour and progress and to this day I am still happy about this program.”

REPETITION & DROPOUT: THE TERRIBLE TWINS

By PROFESSOR SERVAAS VAN DER BERG

Many teachers in developing countries are faced with extreme differences when it comes to children's knowledge, skills and learning abilities in the classroom. Remedial action (remediation) is needed to improve children's weak learning abilities, which often have their roots in their home background – low parental education, little parental support, severe poverty and poor nutrition.

The most common form of remedial action in developing countries is for children to repeat a grade. But repeating a grade can also damage a child's self-esteem and motivation, sometimes forever. So, understanding whether repetition is a helpful practice for struggling learners is important. A century of research has not produced a clear answer on whether it helps or harms repeating learners. If it increases the time learners need to move through the grades, repetition also becomes expensive. But pushing a learner up to the next grade before they are ready is also not ideal, and could lead to them falling behind even further, and even greater learning inequalities, in the higher grade.

In developed countries, when children are at risk of repeating grades, they are usually given other types of support. This support is often offered before children fail, so their self-esteem doesn't suffer. Developing countries, however, usually don't have enough money or staff to do this. Research shows that South African children who repeat early grades make impressive learning progress in the year they repeat, but repeaters at higher grades don't show similar results. Yet, even for those repeaters who do make progress the second time around, it is difficult to tell how they would have done in the next grade.

In the US, one academic, Jimerson, claimed that repeating grades was the single most important reason for learners dropping out of school.⁷⁶ In the Western Cape, my colleague Chris van Wyk⁷⁷ has shown how failing Grade 9 is fatal for many children's education: only a small number

of the Grade 9 learners who fail and return to school eventually reach and complete matric. Three-quarters of them drop out within the next four years. Only 9% reach matric without dropping out or repeating again.

Repeaters are not always the learners who are the least prepared for the next grade. The quality and difficulty of tests that decide who should move up and who should repeat vary a lot between schools. Our research found that a large number of children who did well in a standard test, set by examiners outside their schools, failed their school year, while many who did very badly in the test, passed.

So what should we do in South Africa? There is a case for some repeating of grades, especially in the early years. This should come with some added support to strengthen the learner's chances second time around. But schools often have weak systems for evaluating learners, making it difficult to spot the learners that need support. There is a danger of making the wrong learners repeat grades, with big psychological costs for the learners. And even after repeating grades, most South African school children still perform very far below international standards. Surely the answer is not to massively increase the number of learners repeating grades? Since internal, schools-based assessments are often not helpful, it is better to lean towards too little grade repetition rather than too much. It would be better to consider policies to limit repetition strictly to only those who are clearly not yet ready to learn at a higher level.



Servaas van der Berg is a Professor of Economics and South African Research Chair in the Economics of Social Policy, University of Stellenbosch. He also heads policy research group ReSEP (Research on Socio-economic Policy).

CASE
STUDY

STRENGTHENING SCHOOLS FROM THE INSIDE OUT

For learners to want to stay in school, there must be a shift in attitude that sees teachers, principals, caregivers – and learners themselves – raise their expectations of learners and become more sensitive to their needs. Here we look at two NGOs that have successfully started to shift the culture of the schools with which they work.

ACTION RESEARCH COMMITTEES

BottomUp's Action Research Committees (ARCs) run in three schools in Grassy Park on the Cape Flats. They influence school culture by offering a chance to think about, research and explore why learners disengage from school. They have also given the school community the chance to come up with solutions of their own. At one of these schools, the principal and Senior Management Team are becoming more understanding of learners' individual lives and problems, so that even the detention policy is being reconsidered. At another, ARC members decided to recognise teachers who had started asking learners why they were arriving late, as a way to encourage this type of sensitivity to learners' problems.

KHULA SAYSOA

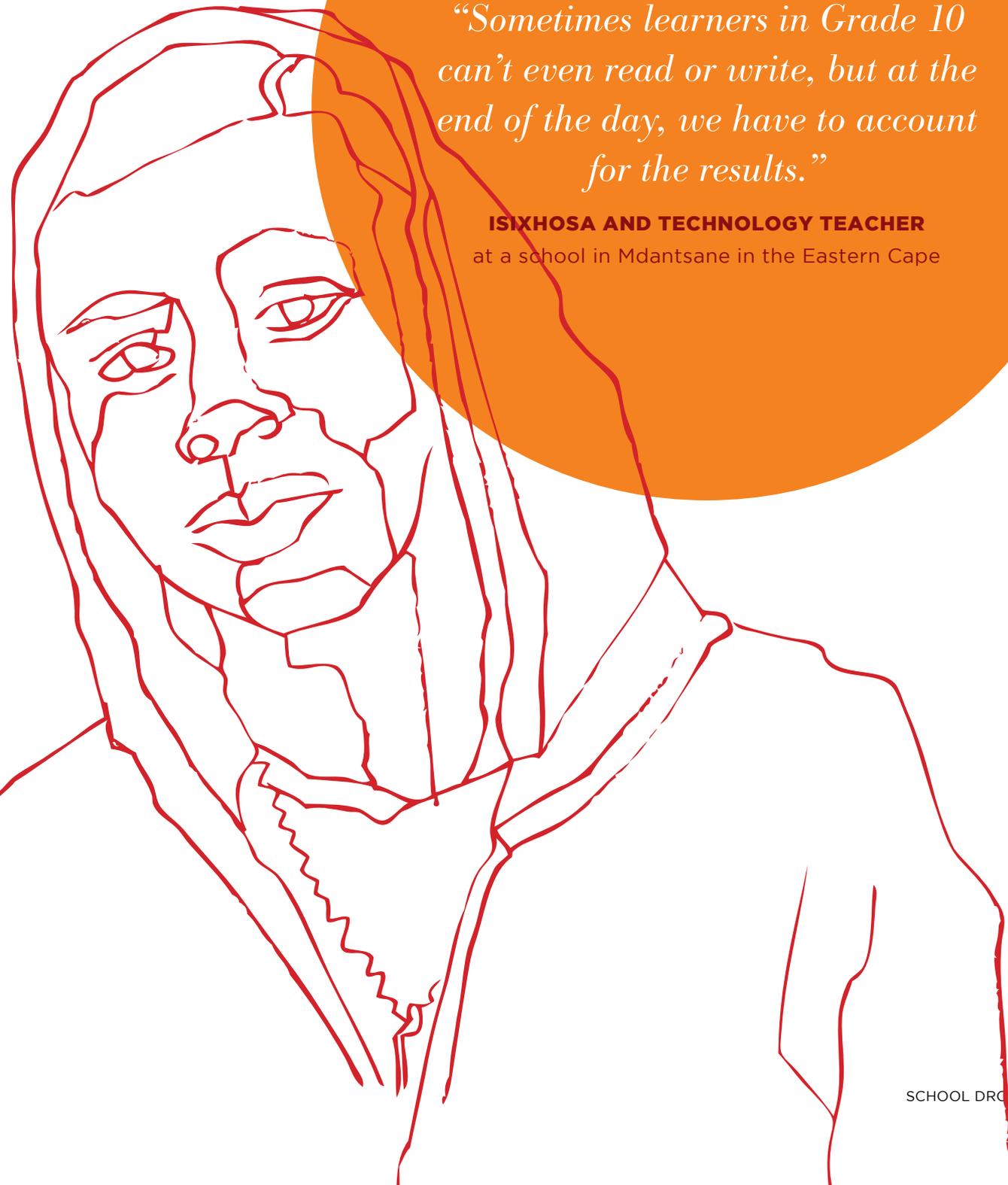
Khula Development Group (KDG)'s Khula Sayso (South African Youth Sharing Opinion) Project aims to promote school attendance, and place value on education, by encouraging young people's participation and collaborating with two schools in Paarl East.

Young people from the Junior Town Council receive mentorship training so that they, in turn, can mentor fellow learners to promote attendance at their schools. School staff are also encouraged to start a Khula Sayso Committee to drive school attendance.



AIDAN*, Bonteheuwel, Cape Town,
dropped out of school in Grade 11:

“Today’s educational systems are just focused on pumping the children full of knowledge instead of drawing out their uniqueness. If they could implement into the school system teaching children how to be happy; how to handle relationships; how to treat their body; and teach them about their actions... I think that would dramatically change the education system.”



*“Sometimes learners in Grade 10
can’t even read or write, but at the
end of the day, we have to account
for the results.”*

ISIXHOSA AND TECHNOLOGY TEACHER
at a school in Mdantsane in the Eastern Cape

D / COMMUNITY FACTORS

A child's neighbourhood can significantly impact their school experience. Children in cities, for example, are more likely to be out of school than those in rural areas.⁷⁸ The exception is farming communities, where youth (aged 16-18) are three times more likely to drop out of school, because they are pulled into farm work.⁷⁹

Neighbourhood safety can also affect school attendance. Two out of three children (of school-going age) in South Africa say they have witnessed community violence, such as hearing gunshots or seeing someone attacked. Some learners report having to miss school days because of crime, gangsterism, or protest action.⁸⁰ If the journey to school is long or unsafe, this can also keep learners from school.

Connecting with supportive community members can help build a sense of safety and stability for a learner, while also giving them a range of role models and mentors. Communities can turn schools into vibrant hubs that enrich community life and extend learning opportunities. Residents can celebrate learners' achievements, and become involved in making sure neighbourhood schools are safe, caring and interesting for learners.

We often think that only highly qualified people are equipped to step in to offer support to young people - and yes, in cases of trauma and abuse, professionals should be the first people we call. But, in most cases, all that is needed is the reliable presence of caring, supportive adult, who is able to listen to a learner, meet frequently with them, and show an interest in their academic performance, aspirations, and problems they may be facing. Networks of simple, loving connections can make a big difference to learner.



PRESTON*, 17, Bonteheuwel, Cape Town, dropped out of school in Grade 10:

“People like us come from places where there ain’t opportunities. Most of us go to sleep hungry at night, so our hearts are sore. We desire more.”

A MULTI-LAYERED APPROACH TO TACKLE DROPOUT



FUTURE LEADERS

Provide children with improved early childhood development (ECD) and school-readiness programmes so they have a good foundation for learning when they start school.



CURRENT LEARNERS IN SCHOOL

Improve learning in the foundational years and keep learners in school by using the tools and approaches outlined in this section.



YOUTH WHO'VE ALREADY DROPPED OUT

Provide programmes that reintegrate them into school or connect them to other sources of education.



SYSTEMIC REFORM

Given that dropout arises from deep-seated socio-economic issues, we need long-term social and economic changes to prevent and lessen the effects of dropout. This should include reducing poverty, creating jobs, and promoting social development.

CASE
STUDY

CREATING CARING, SUPPORTIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

Several NGOs working to prevent school dropout are focusing on providing a caring adult to monitor learners most at risk. These adults offer different types of support to learners, ranging from simple care and attention, to more complicated actions that involve families, schools, and communities. Here we share two stories to show how small, but focused, action from an adult can positively impact the life of a learner.



CHECK & CONNECT

Buko* is the daughter of two hearing-impaired parents, who work in a factory and live far from her secondary school in Mdantsane, East London. In 2016, when she was in Grade 9, they sent her to live with her aunt, who is also deaf, but who lives close to the school. Buko struggled with this change, as her aunt was very strict, and the living conditions were harsh. Although Buko is herself not hearing-impaired, she began to struggle at school, both academically and socially. Buko was often bullied and started to hate school. She became depressed and suicidal, missing 35 days of school that year and failing to write the March exams.

By the end of the year, there was no improvement and Buko was at risk of dropping out. When Masibumbane Development Organisation (MDO) introduced its 'Check & Connect' mentorship programme into the school in early 2017, Buko was identified as one of the high-risk learners who qualified for the programme. Mentor Sarah Ngantweni⁹¹ began working with Buko. Sarah tracked Buko's school and class attendance, providing her with regular counselling and a safe and caring space in which to talk about her problems, and mentoring Buko through her social and academic struggles. Sarah also spoke with Buko's teachers to help them understand her problems and engaged with her aunt to improve her home circumstances.

Sarah also helped Buko to plan and set goals, and to adopt healthy eating and sleeping habits. By the end of 2017, Buko had not missed many days of school and was achieving top marks in her class. She was no longer bullied and had gone from being quiet and withdrawn to being more confident and open.

MOTHER of a Grade 8 learner
in East London:

"It's so nice for my child to have a mentor. She tells parents (like me) things about their child that they don't notice. She tells me to check that my child is doing her homework. I never went to school and didn't care what the children were doing at the school."

IN-SCHOOL SUPPORT

Robin* was a Grade 2 learner at a primary school in Paarl. She had low self-esteem and never made eye contact with her teachers. Because she also couldn't read, Robin's teacher connected her with Alta, a volunteer at the Khula Development Group (KDG).

Alta and Robin would play with playdough together, which helped to create a close connection. Thanks to Alta's patience and involvement, Robin learnt to read and write. "I felt so surprised and excited the day she read her first sentence", Alta remembers.

She encouraged the principal to meet with Robin to congratulate her on her progress. As a result, Robin received a trophy at the school's prize-giving ceremony and had a photograph taken with the Mayor and District Manager. Robin's mother, who watched her daughter receive her award, told Alta, "You know, my child will never forget this night for the rest of her life."

* Name has been changed.



78%

**OF GRADE 4 LEARNERS
CANNOT READ FOR
MEANING*.**

* PIRLS, 2016



SECTION

3

TAKING ACTION: TRACKING LEARNER AND SCHOOL DATA



ELLEN JOHNSON SIRLEAF
Nobel Laureate, 2017

*“Future generations will judge us
not by what we say, but what we do.”*

KNOW THIS

- 1** / The reasons young people leave school are multi-layered and complex. They are often a combination of individual, family, community and school-related factors that build up over time.
- 2** / Tackling the underlying causes of dropout – poverty and inequality – will require massive political commitment and policy change. It’s not impossible, but this will take time. In the meantime, there are steps we can take to ensure learners are supported to stay in school. We can start by recognising dropout as a national problem – one that demands urgent efforts at the school, community, provincial, and national level.
- 3** / One of the most important changes we can make now is to start keeping better records about our learners and monitoring them over time. Tracking absenteeism, learner performance, and school performance means that every learner could be followed and supported, and all schools would be accountable for their learners staying in, and succeeding at, school.
- 4** / Good information about learners’ journeys through school allows us to pre-empt the challenges that may lead to disengagement and eventual dropout.

WHAT TYPES OF EDUCATION INFORMATION ARE WE CURRENTLY COLLECTING IN SOUTH AFRICA?

Our education system would benefit hugely from collecting accurate, detailed and regular information about schools and learners. Collecting the right types of information (data) over time can help us to better understand the needs in our education system, design better policy and programming, and track our progress.



Here, our information systems are **RELATIVELY STRONG**.



SHOWING IMPROVEMENT – Each year, DBE is improving the accuracy and detail of this data.



NEEDS WORK – Collecting education and attendance data is one thing. A much bigger challenge is collecting and using more complex information about learner wellbeing.

BASIC DATA

This tells us about the number of learners enrolled in each grade, as well as their age, gender and race. This helps government allocate the correct number of teachers, plan and cost the delivery of textbooks, roll out nutrition programmes, and properly divide up the total education budget.

EDUCATION OUTCOMES DATA

This tells us how learners are doing at school, including marks and pass rates for every grade.

BEHAVIOURAL DATA

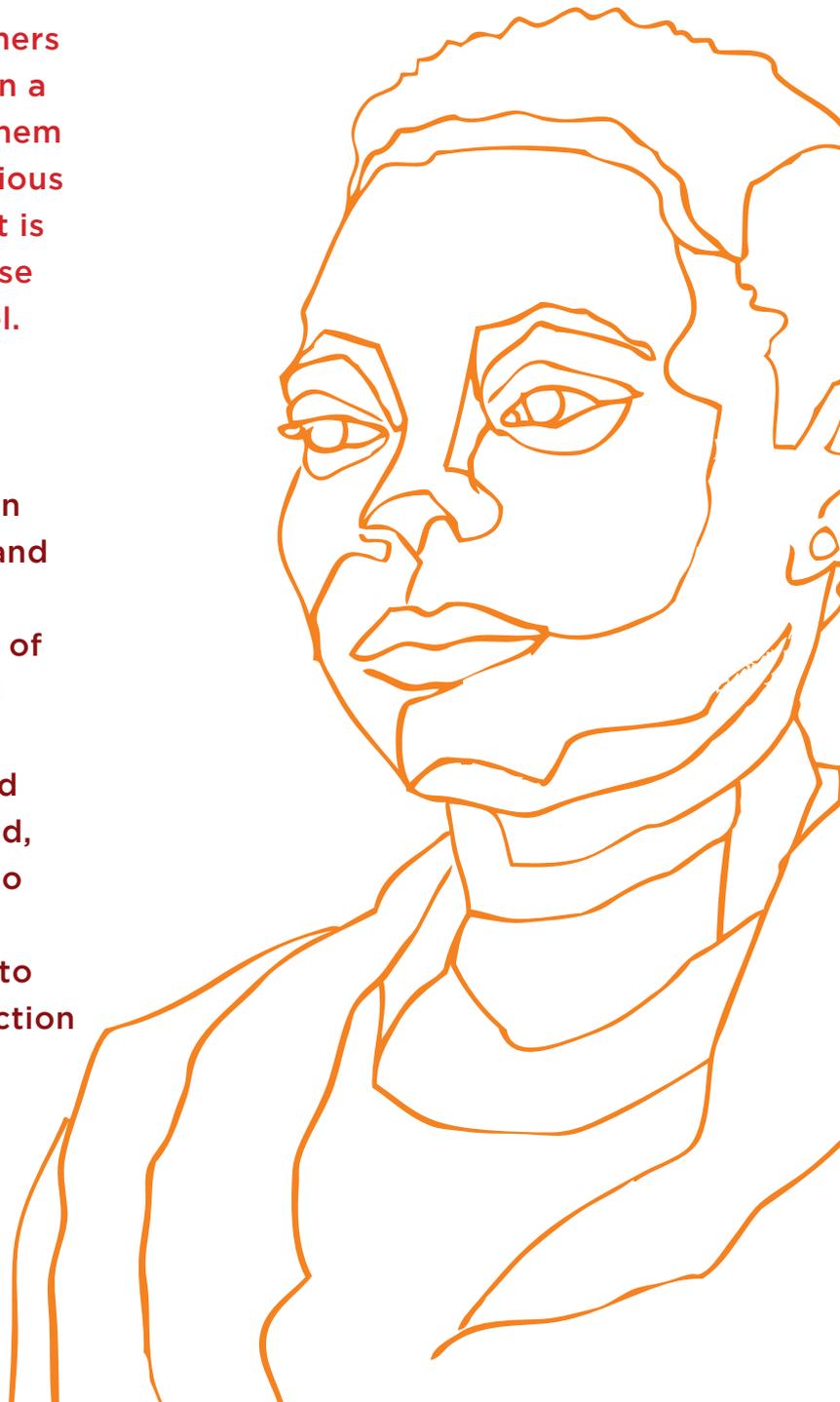
This tells us about learners' wellbeing, helping us identify the most at-risk learners. Developing proper systems for this data is more complex and more expensive. However, there is great, untapped potential in gathering data on individual learners. This information would allow us to tell a story about a learner's education journey, and to know when and how to provide support. Data collected at the right level, and the right time can inform Early Warning Systems (EWS) for learners at risk of dropping out.

South Africa simply does not have the right types of records (datasets) to measure and monitor school dropout properly. While there are several datasets tracking matric exam results, annual school surveys, and master school lists, this information is only at the 'aggregate' (collective) level, not at the level of individual learners. Learner-level information could help us flag which young people are most at risk of dropping out. However, the way in which dropout information is currently recorded in the South African Schools Administration and Management System (SA-SAMS) is not well designed for this.

WHAT SHOULD WE BE TRACKING?

While collective (aggregate) data helps us understand broad trends, and draw connections and comparisons, it doesn't help educators identify learners at risk. This is because it cannot describe the process in which learners become disengaged from school, in a way that might allow us to reach them before they drop out. If we are serious about keeping learners in school, it is essential that we collect and analyse data at the learner and school level.

By tracking individual learners' enrolment, absenteeism, academic performance and behaviour, we can better understand their struggles and pathways through school. This will allow us to identify learners at risk of dropout, and design well-informed support programmes, as early as possible. Teacher and school-based performance should also be tracked, as a way of motivating educators to help learners succeed. This would allow educators that perform well to be rewarded, and for supportive action to be taken early when schools or teachers are struggling.



1



DEVELOPING A LEARNER MONITORING SYSTEM

(Based on UNICEF's guidelines on Education Participation and Dropout)

South Africa's education system already has relatively strong information management systems. These include the School Administration Management System (SA-SAMS), the Learner Unit Record Tracking System (LURITS), and the National Education Infrastructure Management System (NEIMS) to name a few. But, as we have already shown, there is a lot of room for improvement, especially in collecting learner-level data. Alongside are UNICEF guidelines for developing an effective learner monitoring system.

DECIDE WHAT INFORMATION TO RECORD AND FOLLOW

The types of learner information that are measured and tracked are called 'indicators'. The definition of each indicator should be the same across provinces.



FOLLOW THE ABC'S OF GOOD INDICATORS

There are some basic indicators that any effective learner monitoring system should be following. If accurately collected and monitored, these could help schools to identify who is disengaging at school and therefore at risk of dropout:

Academic Results,
Behaviour Problems and
Chronic Absenteeism.



Each learner needs a

UNIQUE NATIONAL TRACKING NUMBER

to follow their progress over time. If this long-term data story is not collected, or cannot be compared across regions and schools, then learners cannot be properly supported.



AN EARLY WARNING SYSTEM FOR SOUTH AFRICA

Imagine a data system that alerts education officials when learners are heading towards rocky ground, providing them with the information needed to address the problem. With large class sizes it is easy to understand how learners who struggle can go completely unnoticed. An Early Warning System (EWS) requires the ongoing monitoring of learner-level data as it works on the basis of spotting the individual at risk. Learner-level data is the only way to implement prevention strategies, offer support, and ensure that learners are not falling through the cracks. It also enriches research by allowing us to track learners over long periods. Such work is essential to inform government strategy. An EWS in South Africa should aim to rigorously and universally track three indicators at the learner-level, namely repetition, behaviour and attendance.



JETHRO*, Grade 7, Grassy Park, Cape Town:

“Sometimes we avoid school out of fear and frustration of being bullied by others. Sometimes my friends and me wear the wrong shoes to school, so that the teachers can send us home.”

A **ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE** can be tracked by looking at the number of learners who repeat grades. Repetition is already captured in SA-SAMS (nationwide data), and CEMIS (Western Cape data). This is a record of whether a learner passed, was progressed without passing, or is repeating the year. In a study by the Joint Education Trust, repetition was found to correlate strongly with dropout in the SA school system.

B **BEHAVIOUR** considers a record of whether a learner is disruptive, or disengaged, and is a strong indicator for learners in need of support. The difficulty with the current way of capturing behavioural indicators is that this forms the start of a disciplinary procedure that must inevitably reach a conclusion. With the high rates of dropout and disengagement, this indicator needs to be shifted to a support-based monitoring outcome, rather than being related only to discipline. Principals reported not using this functionality for fear of it exacerbating the push-out factors associated with school dropout.

C **CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM** can be tracked using attendance indicators. This is an area full of complexity in South Africa, but gaps in information can be closed if we build the right skills, fill posts for administration support, and improve systems for capturing attendance at the learner level.

See Appendix III on page 73 for a more detailed breakdown of these indicators.

LEARNING FROM THE ZERO DROPOUT CAMPAIGN

As part of the Zero Dropout campaign, we tested what it would look like to collect information about the ABC's at the learner-level in South Africa. In doing so, we discovered a number of challenges. Some of them were similar to challenges found internationally, including difficulties ensuring that indices were the same across provinces, that the data was accurate and detailed, and that there was sufficient technology and skill to run the information system. But, the pilot also revealed a new set of challenges unique to the South African context.

Although **ACADEMIC RESULTS** are collected, and form a relatively accurate dataset, this information is not available to researchers at the learner-level in South Africa, due to the system of rights protection. A unique numeric number to identify learners would be way to access data, while still protecting learners' anonymity.

BEHAVIOUR PROBLEMS are not well captured in any part of the information management system.

CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM is captured in some provinces but not in others. This is a critical learner-level indicator, which requires regular collection. In South Africa, the data is poor, collection is not done well at schools, and in some cases, it is not collected at all at the learner-level.

SOUTH AFRICA'S POLICY ON LEARNER ATTENDANCE AND CONTINUOUS ABSENCE

As part of the National Education Policy Act (27 of 1996), the Policy on Learner Attendance defines 'continuous absence' as 10 consecutive school days missed without the learner giving a valid reason. After a continuous absence, learners are to be recorded as having dropped out. The aim is to encourage attendance, and provide Provincial Education Departments (PEDs) with standard procedures to record, manage and monitor learners' attendance. But, experience shows that information about absent learners is not being accurately recorded, and many principals are unaware of their responsibility to the Policy on Learner Attendance.⁸²

MEASURES OF SUCCESS: WHAT EFFECTIVE LEARNER AND SCHOOL DATA TRACKING LOOKS LIKE

/ Early Warning Systems that work: these would be tracking absenteeism, behaviour changes, academic performance, disability, and progression per learner over their entire school career. This information should be able to trigger the right types of support when certain learners are shown to be struggling or pulling away from school.

/ Schools are recognised and celebrated for good academic performance and keeping 100% of their learners in school. Meanwhile, schools with poor performance are held accountable.

/ Schools are rewarded for helping learners succeed and are therefore motivated to support all learners, not just those who are already doing well in school.

WHAT CAN WE DO TO IMPROVE EDUCATION INFORMATION SYSTEMS?

Each of us has a role to play in making sure we have good information about our learners. Information that is detailed, accurate and regularly collected can inform a more attentive and ultimately more effective education system, in which every learner is supported to finish matric.

PARENTS AND GOVERNING BODIES

Parents can consult with schools about the information they have on their children, and find out what they can do to support them. All schools should have School Based Support Teams (SBSTs). Enquire about one at your child's school. School Governing Bodies (SGBs) should play an active role in ensuring that the work of Support Teams is based on sound information about learners, and that parents play an important role in SGBs.

SOUTH AFRICANS

By providing support to the schools in your community, signing up onto a SGB, and providing support and information to school leadership, South Africans can get behind national efforts to keep learners in school and learning well. Open the conversation about data, and how this can be used in creative ways to reach children in need.

LEARNERS

Learners can open a conversation about collecting learner information with their representative council, teachers and principals. Find out how your school collects attendance records, and see how you can help improve this. Understanding and using data is a valuable skill in today's world, and you have a constitutional right to know what the data says about you. Find out whether your school has a Support Team and how they use data for learners in need.

TEACHERS

South African teachers are already overwhelmed with work. But they are also the ones with knowledge of individual children, and are therefore best placed to make recommendations for their support. Consulting with the District Based Support Teams, and joining or setting up an Institution Based Support Team (within the school) might allow teachers to provide added support to learners falling behind. Having good information about a learners' attendance and marks over time can help teachers identify at-risk learners.

SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

School leadership should understand the importance of collecting accurate, detailed information about their learners, regularly. If the data is correct, then the right learners stand to receive the right support at the right times.

TESTING DATA-DRIVEN TOOLS TO IDENTIFY LEARNERS AT RISK OF DROPOUT

In 2013, the New Leaders Foundation (NLF) partnered with the Michael & Susan Dell Foundation to support the Department of Basic Education to improve its collection and use of education data.⁸³ This resulted in the launch of the Data Driven Districts (DDD) Programme – a systemic intervention that aims to embed a data-driven decision-making culture into the education system, with the ultimate aim of improving educational outcomes for learners.

Central to the programme is the DDD Dashboard – a web-based tool that draws together and maps learner performance information, which schools capture on the SA-SAMS or other third-party information systems.

The DDD Dashboard provides an overall summary of learner performance, but also more detailed information for each learner, to help education officials make informed, evidence-based decisions.

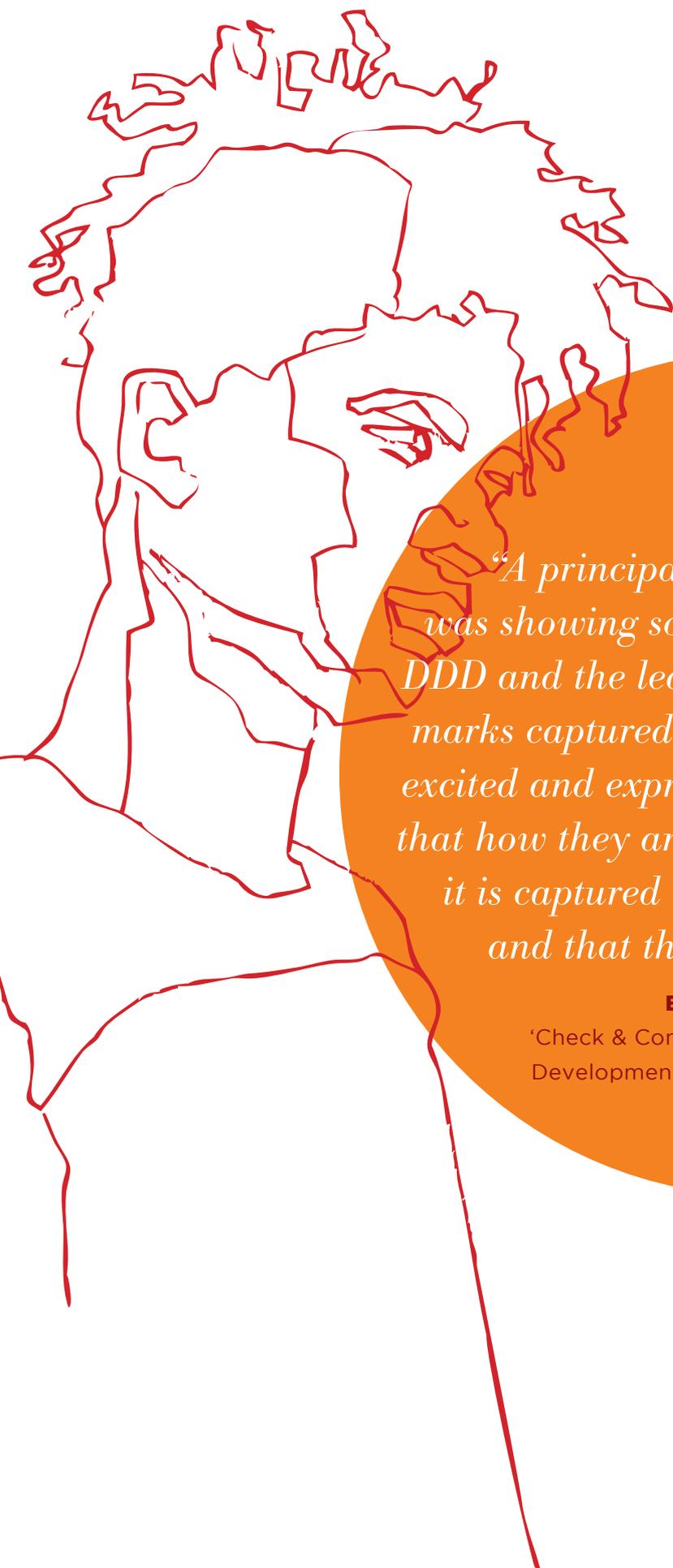
The programme has been successfully rolled out in seven of the country's nine provinces, partnering with the Education Information Management System (EMIS) departments of these provinces to ensure the best use of SA-SAMS.

As of October 2018, the DDD Dashboard represented 11 million out of the 12.5 million learners in these seven provinces, and had over 4 400 repeat users – from principals to district directors.

To promote the use of DDD Dashboard and encourage data-based decision-making in the education system, the DDD team is working with several NGOs currently running education programmes across the country.

In addition to helping them collect data, the team is supporting them to turn that data into insights they can act on. New Leaders Foundation has developed data-based tools to help identify learners at risk of failing or dropping out of school so the necessary support can be provided to these learners before they are lost from the education system. For example, if a learner is not attending school, the school can use this information to follow up with a phone call or home visit.

Addressing absenteeism often uncovers other issues like abuse, substance abuse, learning disabilities, mental health issues, etc. that can impact a learner's academic performance and risk of dropout.

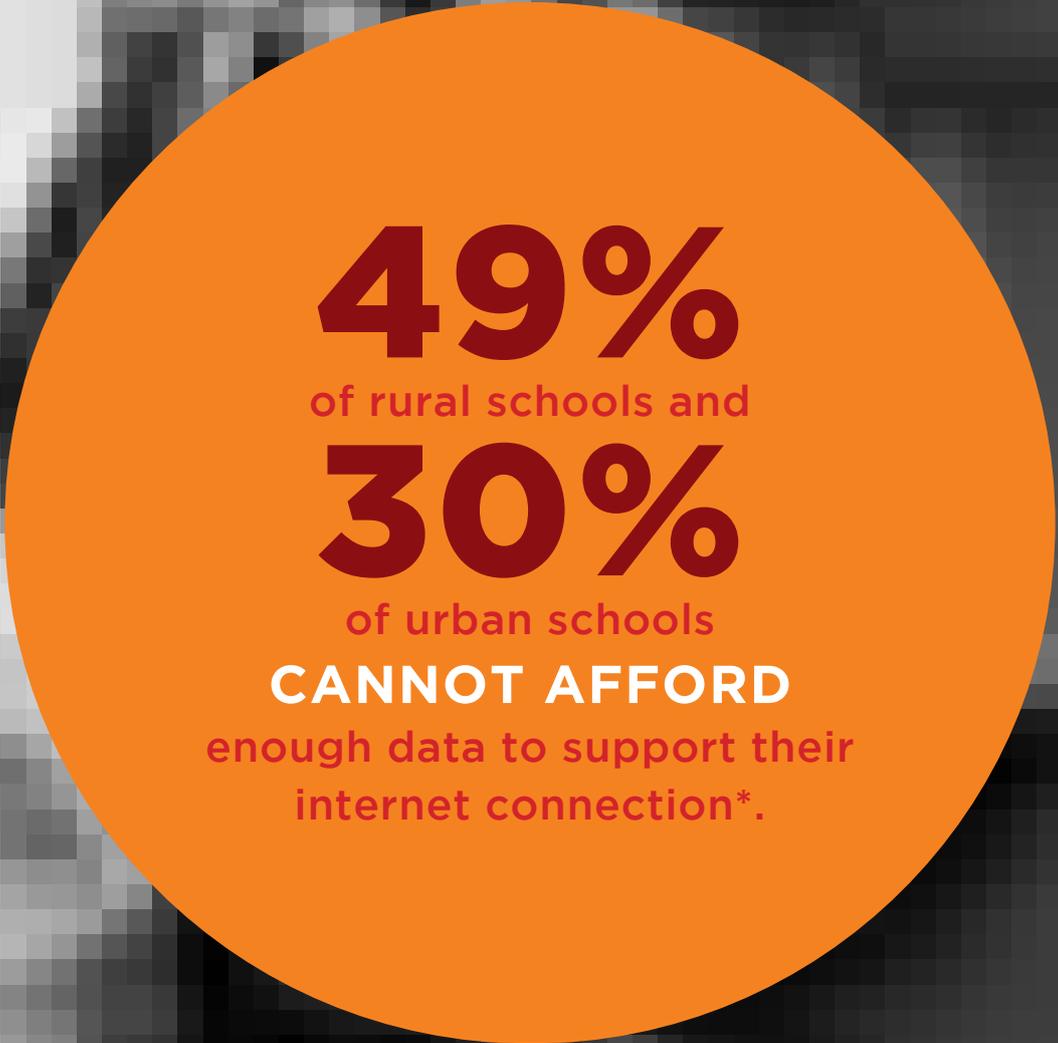


“A principal in one of our schools was showing some Grade 11 learners the DDD and the learners saw their names and marks captured on the system. They got so excited and expressed that they are amazed that how they are doing is so important that it is captured in this national database and that they are accounted for.”

BUSISWA JOYA

'Check & Connect' Mentor, Masibumbane
Development Organisation, East London





* MSDF - Beyond the Numbers report (2019)

SECTION

4

STEPS
WE CAN
TAKE TO
ADDRESS
SCHOOL
DROPOUT





AFRICAN PROVERB

“It takes a whole village to raise a child.”

With **COMMITMENT**, **CREATIVITY**, and **DEDICATION**, it is possible to work towards a future where all youth complete Grade 12, leaving them better prepared for post-school education and employment, and better able to participate in society as productive, engaged citizens.

There are a number of everyday actions we can all take to help young people stay in and succeed at school:

PRIVATE SECTOR

- Work with schools and government to support and grow their anti-dropout campaigns.
- Speak at schools about career options and what is needed to enter them.
- Provide training, internships and workplace learning opportunities for young people.
- Broadcast the skills needed in the corporate sector and help grow them.

PRINCIPALS & TEACHERS

- Act on policies that support learners' needs and do not accept harmful practices like bullying or corporal punishment.
- Support learners who are falling behind and believe in their potential – keep in mind learners' home circumstances.
- Keep daily attendance registers and use this information to better respond to your learners' needs.
- Take care of yourself and ask for support if you need it.
- Speak kindly, reject bullying, do your homework, wear your uniform proudly, and support your peers.
- Show teachers gratitude and respect. Let a teacher or principal know when a classmate is absent.
- Think about your future and understand that school is a stepping stone to get you there.
- Speak out if your teacher is often absent, or if you don't have the tools you need to learn.
- Ask for help when you need it and keep asking until you get it.

LEARNERS

ZERO

SCHOOL DROPOUT

GOVERNMENT

- Focus on keeping learners in school, not just matric pass rates.
- Ensure the curriculum is engaging and matches the needs of the working world.
- Improve teacher training and support efforts to strengthen the education system.
- Focus on learning outcomes rather than simply covering the curriculum.
- Celebrate teachers for high attendance rates and sustained enrolment figures between grades.

COMMUNITIES & CIVIL SOCIETY

- Encourage learners to complete school. Help with homework, internship opportunities, or after-school programmes.
- Take an interest in the youth in your community and celebrate learners and their commitment to learning.
- Support the development of learner-friendly spaces and ensure the routes between them are safe.
- Help learners access services they might need e.g. Internet, counselling, social grants/IDs, etc.
- Raise awareness about school dropout and hold government accountable for delivering quality education.

PARENTS

- Your support is critical to ensure that your child stays and succeeds at school.
- Get involved in your child's school.
- Support educators and encourage other parents to do the same.
- Play, talk and read with your child at home.
- Take care of yourself and ask for support if you need it.

WHY WE NEED TO BUILD WEBS OF SIMPLE, LOVING CONNECTIONS IN OUR SCHOOLS... AND WHERE DO WE BEGIN?

By TABISA BATA

When I was young, it was common to be asked what you wanted to be when you grew up. The answer was simple – a doctor, a nurse, or a teacher. This was usually enough to earn you 50c, or a R1 coin if you were lucky, plus an applause if you could recite your clan praise song by heart. This was a time, not so long ago, when adults looked at every child in the community as hope for the nation, part of the next generation of leaders and professionals. They expressed their expectations through those simple questions, and those questions encouraged the child to want to be ‘something’ in life. It did not matter if the adults were not educated themselves – most didn’t actually have much education; they were respected simply because they were older.

This was also a time when you would never see a child loitering in the streets during school hours. It did not matter whose child you were, if an adult saw you in the streets, they had the right to reprimand you, or worse, give you a lashing or two for ‘bunking school’. We say in our culture, “It takes a nation to raise a child” – and this really was an age when every adult was your parent.

Nowadays, our communities are plagued by hopelessness and apathy more than ever before. The communal values we once held so dear are slowly being eroded; where communities were once bound together, individualism now wins out. You don’t know who your neighbour is anymore, which has affected the way we care for and relate to the children in our communities. Do we still ask what they want to be when they grow up? Are we still bothered when we see them roaming the streets during school hours? Do we feel responsible for their safety and for their schooling? Do we still see them as our hope for the future?

These days, children grow up in poor, hostile and often violent homes. Then they go to school, where they’re confronted by helpless teachers, peer pressure, and bullying. Some turn to drugs and sex to escape their daily realities. Others get caught up in crime or relationships with older men, engaging in transactional sex to get material things. Their complex lives are made even more complicated by the absence of positive role models. They lack connection and guidance.

We need to reach these children early. We need to build webs of simple, loving connections in the space where children spend most of their days – in schools! Through school-based relationships, we have a window of opportunity to impact positively on their lives, asking questions and listening to their answers in ways that let them know they matter. We need to let them verbalise their expectations for the future. Simple check-in sessions could achieve this.

Tabisa Bata is the Interim Executive Director for Masibumbane Development Organisation in East London

Through our work in schools we've seen that it is often the most troublesome learner in the classroom who yearns for the most attention, and that a little attention paid at an individual level can open up a channel for the release of the struggles they encounter daily, but seldom - if ever - get the chance to talk about. A routine conversation with a caring adult can be the difference between hope for tomorrow or a suicidal outlook today. Anybody who cares can do this: teachers, parents, a group of unemployed youth. All it takes is persistence, a consistent presence and an open heart to develop a relationship of trust to mentor and guide the leaders and legends of tomorrow.

What do you want to be when you grow up? Tell me, I'm listening.



School grade repetition
alone costs South Africa

R20bn
PER YEAR

* Repetition study, Resep, 2019



CONCLUSION

“The failure to offer children of all backgrounds the opportunity to realise their true potential through more and especially better-quality education perpetuates the cycle of inequality along the lines of race, location and socio-economic status.”⁸⁴

W

hile getting a matric is by no means a magic solution for youth unemployment, not having one makes it impossible for young people to enter post-school education, trapping them in low-paying, unskilled jobs – that is if they are able to find work at all.

Many of South Africa's learners have teachers who are overwhelmed and underqualified; parents working long hours; and school management that fails to meaningfully address their challenges. These young people desperately need people in their corner. Of course, there are those teachers and principals, caregivers and NGOs already helping learners to succeed, despite the many factors pulling and pushing them out of school. We need to learn from them and build on their efforts.

Every day millions of learners go to school. Many of them are unable to read for meaning or do basic Maths calculations. Yet, they show up – eager to learn and change their lives. These learners cannot afford to wait for the big systemic changes that are needed to turn the education system around. We owe it to them to step in as part of a collective effort to prevent dropout – either by keeping children in school through to matric, or by directing them into alternative pathways of education and training.

**AS A COUNTRY, WE MUST
COMMIT TO ZERO DROPOUT
- AND WE HAVE TO DO IT
NOW.**

APPEN- DICES

APPENDIX 1

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE EDUCATION SYSTEM IN SOUTH AFRICA

COMPULSORY EDUCATION

The South African Schools Act (Act 84 of 1996, section 3[1]) made it compulsory for all children to attend school from the first school day of the year in which they reach age seven until the last day of the year in which they reach age 15 or Grade 9 – whichever comes first.

THE NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK

Since 2008, the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) has been using the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) to arrange levels of learning achievements. This framework awards registered learners with national accreditation based on their skills and knowledge. The NQF is made up of 10 levels that fall within three bands: The General Education and Training (GET) or Basic Education band, which comprises Grades R to 9 (this band is further divided into three phases, namely the Foundation Phase (Grades 1 to 3), Intermediate Phase (Grades 4 to 6), and Senior Phase (Grades 7 to 9)); the Further Education and Training (FET) band, which comprises Grades 10 to 12 (and equivalent levels in FET colleges); and the Higher Education band, which comprises courses at tertiary institutions, including universities and colleges.

BAND	NQF LEVEL	DESCRIPTION / CERTIFICATE
GENERAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING (GET)	NQF1	Grade 9 Adult Basic Education and Training Level 4
	NQF2	Grade 10 N1 National Certificate Vocational (NC(V))2
FURTHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING (FET)	NQF3	Grade 11 N2 NC(V)3
	NQF4	National Senior Certificate (matric) Trade Certificate (earned after completing the equivalent to Grade 12 at a Trade School or Trade College) National Accredited Technical Education Diploma (NATED) NC(V)4
	NQF5	Higher Certificate
HIGHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING	NQF6	Diploma Advanced Certificate
	NQF7	Bachelors Degree Advanced Diploma
	NQF8	Honours Degree Postgraduate Diploma
	NQF9	Masters Degree
	NQF10	Post-doctoral Research Degree Doctorate

APPENDIX 2

NPO CASE STUDIES ILLUSTRATING SUCCESSFUL STRATEGIES TO KEEP LEARNERS IN SCHOOL

BOTTOMUP BottomUp is a non-profit that works in under-resourced schools in the Grassy Park, Lotus River and Ottery area. Their approach equips young people to understand why, and under what circumstances, their peers drop out of school, and address these collectively as a school.

KHULA DEVELOPMENT GROUP (KDG) Khula Development Group is a community-based organisation that supports out-of-school children in the Paarl East area, with the mission of re-engaging school children at risk of dropping out.

MASIBUMBANE DEVELOPMENT ORGANISATION (MDO) East London-based Masibumbane Development Organisation uses an Early Warning System to support and respond to young people at risk of dropping out.

NEW LEADERS FOUNDATION (NLF) New Leaders Foundation is a not-for-profit company that is committed to transforming South African education, by developing empowered leaders in education, as well as in their organisation, who will shape a positive future for South African children.

PRATHAM Pratham is an innovative learning organisation created to improve the quality of education in India. It focuses on high-quality, low-cost, programmes that can be rolled out across schools and address gaps in the education system.

APPENDIX 3

INDICATORS (TYPES OF INFORMATION) TO TRACK DROPOUT, OR RISKS OF DROPOUT, AMONG LEARNERS AT A COLLECTIVE LEVEL

INDICATOR	MEASUREMENT UNIT	DESCRIPTION	CALCULATION METHOD
ENROLMENT BY GRADE	#	Learners officially registered at a given grade, regardless of age.	Number of learners enrolled at a given grade at the beginning of the year (as of the 10th day).
DROPOUT RATE BY GRADE	%	Proportion of learners from a cohort enrolled in a given grade at a given school year who are no longer enrolled the following school year.	Subtract the sum of promotion rate and repetition rate from 100.
PROMOTION RATE BY GRADE	%	Proportion of learners from a cohort enrolled in a given grade at a given school year who study in the next grade the following school year.	Number of new entrants to the following grade in school year (t+1)* divided by the number of learners from the same cohort enrolled in a given grade in the previous school year t multiplied by 100.
REPETITION RATE BY GRADE	%	Number of repeaters in a given grade in a given school year, expressed as a percentage of enrolment in that grade in the previous school year.	Number of repeaters in a given grade in school year (t+1)* divided by the number of learners from the same cohort enrolled in the same grade in the previous school year (t)* multiplied by 100.
LEARNER ABSENTEEISM RATE BY GRADE	%	Proportion of days that learners were absent in a given grade in a given period.	Total number of days learners were absent divided by total number of available learner school days per term in a given grade.

* If you are tracking the Grade 9 cohort in the current year (t), you need to compare against the Grade 8 cohort in the previous year (t-1) and the Grade 10 cohort in the following year (t+1). This ensures that you're actually referencing the same cohort of learners, and not comparing this year's Grade 9 cohort to last year's Grade 9 cohort.

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- 80 Ibid.
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- 82 Data collection also needs to be strengthened – not just the tools gathering data – as data gathering poses a significant problem for effective monitoring in South Africa. For example, various in-school issues such as ineffective school management, poor data capturing practices and issues associated with 'ghost-learners' come into play when trying to collect accurate data on school enrolment and attendance.
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WRITTEN BY

- Beth Nosizwe Vale



The Zero Dropout campaign is a national campaign working towards halving school dropout by 2030.

Get in touch with us:

MERLE MANSFIELD: Programme Director

merle@dgmt.co.za

+27 (0)21 670 9840

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