



**ZERO
DROP/OUT**

EARLY WARNING SYSTEM (EWS) TOOLKIT

**AN INTERACTIVE
INSTRUCTIONAL GUIDE
FOR USING THE EWS
EXCEL SPREADSHEET**

This toolkit is part of a series aimed at supporting schools to halve the rate of learner dropout by 2030.



WELCOME NOTE

We, at the Zero Dropout Campaign, know just how heavy your workload is and that often, you're teaching classes that are far too large to manage. We know that you are doing your best to juggle the demands of the curriculum with the needs of individual learners - wearing many different hats on any given day, like counsellor, caregiver, role model and mentor.

That's why we have created a tool designed to help you collect the information you need to show others how these challenges affect your ability to teach. The tool will allow you to capture and track information about individual learners, providing you with the evidence you need to call in additional support. This in turn will free up more of your time to focus on the curriculum. The tool also comes with a call to action, as we aim to inspire the nation to better support educators by realising that learners in South Africa face unique challenges, and require much more individualised support than the education system is currently able to provide on its own. As educators, you are best placed to create this rich base of information around why learning outcomes are below the standard they should be. By using this tool, you will be helping to build a body of evidence from the learner perspective and experience to better inform how we can provide learners, and educators like you, with the right support at the right time.



WHAT IS THE EARLY WARNING SYSTEM?

School dropout is a serious problem in South Africa. Fortunately, there are ways to prevent dropout if we intentionally monitor the warning signs that learners may show while they are at school. School dropout is not a spontaneous event – it doesn't just happen from one day to the next. It's a process of disengagement in which a learner is pushed or pulled away from school because of disruptions at home, at school, and/or in their community that build up over time. This means that educators are in a unique position to identify the early signs of disengagement and can take action to prevent individual learners from dropping out. There are many root causes for disengagement and dropout, which can be difficult to know, as they may be related to family and community rather than school life – but there are some clear signs of a learner beginning to disengage, which educators are better able to spot if they're equipped with the right knowledge.



The Zero Dropout Campaign has designed a straightforward tool that gives educators the power to track warning signs of disengagement, which is a precursor to dropout. Being aware of the warning signs and intentionally tracking them will guide educators to make decisions on how best to support their learners. The key aim of the Early Warning System (EWS) is to help educators to prevent dropout.

This tool aims to inform and guide educators about the type of 'warning sign' behaviours to look out for; how to recognise patterns of disengagement; and how to flag learners in need of additional support.

TO “DROP OUT”

To permanently leave school before writing the National Senior Certificate (matric) exam or obtaining another National Qualification Framework (NQF) Level 4 qualification.



WHY SHOULD I CONSIDER USING IT?

School dropout is preventable, provided learners receive the right support and care at the right time.

The EWS tool provides educators with a snapshot view of what's happening with learners in their class over a period of time. This makes the task of assisting learners in key areas easier to monitor and manage.

QUICK TIP 🔍

Teaching in South Africa is challenging as learners face a unique combination of learning and social challenges. The main aim of this tool is to provide a common framework to enable new ways of identifying those in need of additional support, so that educators can focus on teaching and learning tasks. This will provide them with a clearer view of how these tasks are being absorbed, or not being absorbed, in the minds of the diverse learners in their classrooms.



HOW DOES IT WORK?

We have made it easy for you to download the EWS tool. All you need to do is [click here](#) to download an Excel spreadsheet that uses a traffic light system to show which learners are at high, medium or low risk.

As details about the learners are captured, such as how they are performing academically or observations about their behaviour, the colour will change. Green means there is very little risk, and that the learner does not appear to be at risk of dropout. Yellow means that a learner is at medium risk, and some attention should be paid. Red means that the learner is showing signs that they are at high risk of dropping out.

As you update the observations as key events occur, such as a learner beginning to fail key subjects or displaying certain worrying behaviours, the colours will change to update the level of risk, and draw attention to the problem areas.

RISK COLOUR CODING: THE TRAFFIC LIGHT SYSTEM

! LOW OR NO RISK

The learner may exhibit some concerning behaviours, but not enough to indicate that they are at risk of dropout.

! MEDIUM RISK

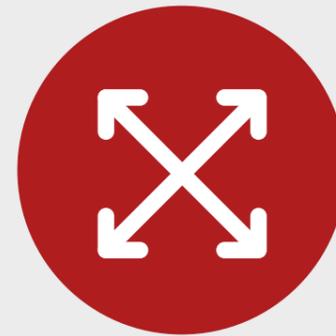
The learner requires support in some critical areas. They may be on a path toward disengagement.

! HIGH RISK

This learner is showing clear signs through their behaviour and learning that they may be at risk of dropping out. They may be in urgent need of additional support.

QUICK TIP 🔍

If a learner is at medium or high risk, don't wait to get them the support that they need. Use the overall data to show evidence of the size of the problem you face.



WHAT ARE THE 'DIMENSIONS' AND WHY ARE THEY IMPORTANT?

The tool includes six key dimensions. These dimensions are like a 'menu' of some of the key problems faced by a classroom of learners. They are broadly-grouped problem areas, which include the early signs of potential school dropout.

The first three, known as the ABCs - Academic Performance, Behavioural Issues and Chronic Absenteeism - are essential, as global research has shown that these are the key indicators of learner disengagement and dropout. Early Childhood Development (ECD), Repetition & Dropout, and Disability are more specific indicators which are optional to add if an educator feels that these are areas applicable to learners in their class.

SIX KEY DIMENSIONS

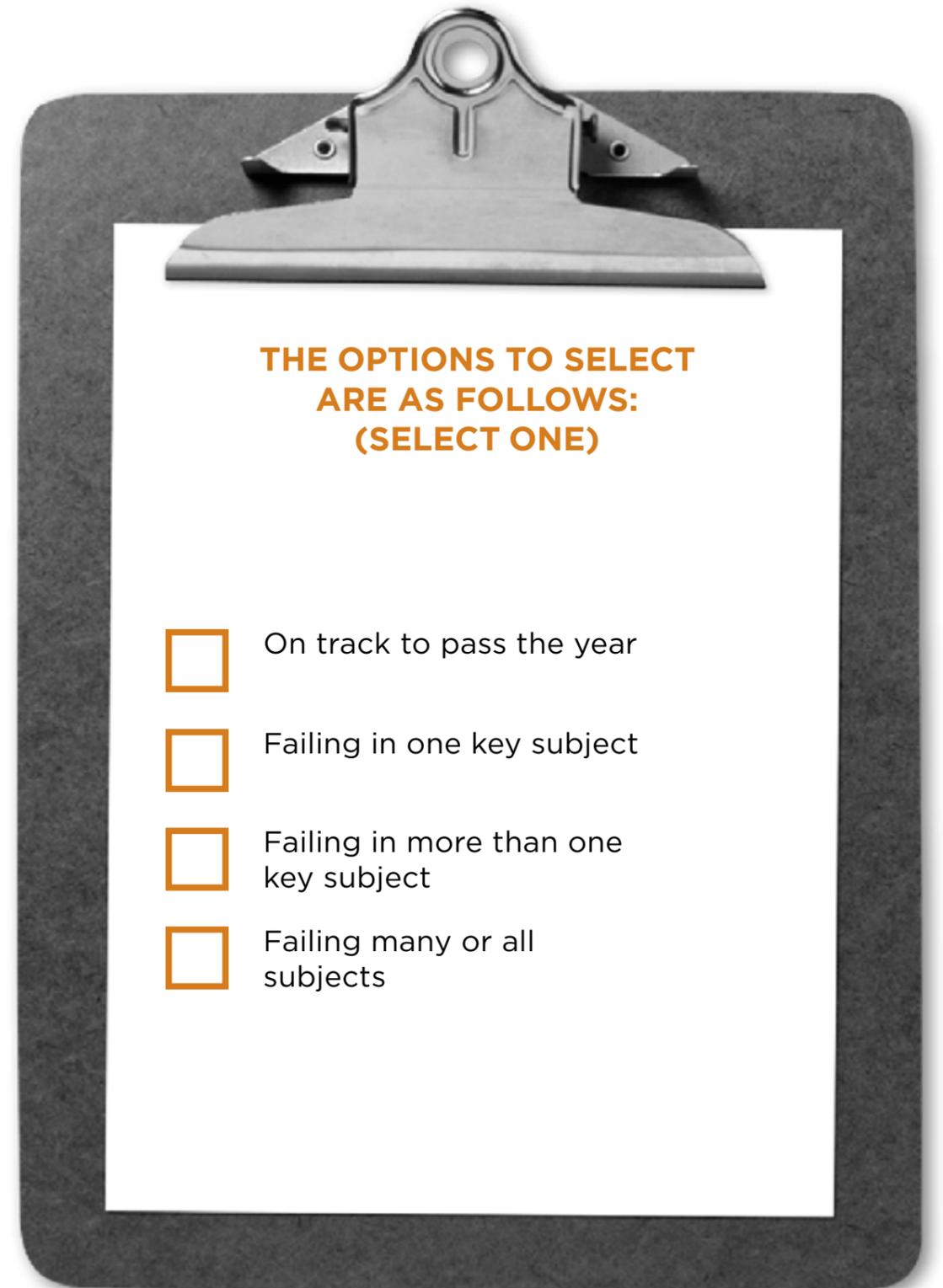
This section explores warning signs you need to look out for in each dimension.

#1

ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

When a learner's marks begin to drop, this is an important sign to look out for as it could indicate they are beginning to disengage, or could lead to disengagement and eventual dropout.

Declining marks may be the result of a learner not understanding or absorbing material because of academic or social challenges, which could lead to the learner having to repeat a grade. It has been shown that repeating a grade is strongly associated with dropout. A dip in a learner's marks should be flagged early on to signal possible disengagement.



QUICK TIP 🔍

This list outlines key observations, where the first is the lowest risk, and the 'Failing many or all subjects' represents a much higher level of risk. When a learner is beginning to struggle academically, educators can use the Excel spreadsheet to register relevant changes.

#2

BEHAVIOURAL ISSUES



Unmotivated learners tend to opt out, do the bare minimum required and can be difficult to teach. They are unwilling to participate in class discussions, frequently look bored, tune out, distract others, give up easily on tasks, talk out of turn, arrive late to class, disrupt the flow of classes and have poor attendance. As they get older they are more likely to skip classes, engage in challenging anti-social behaviours, and are more at risk of dropping out of school.¹



This excerpt sums up the kind of behavioural issues we see in learners and why these may be a problem. Studies by UNESCO and UNICEF have found that disruptive behaviour is an early warning sign for school dropout. Observing disengaged behaviour and disruptive behaviour can help to identify which learners might be at risk of dropping out, especially if they are showing other warning signs too.

End Note ¹ on page 32

THE OPTIONS TO SELECT ARE AS FOLLOWS: (SELECT ONE)

- No behaviour likely to disrupt learning
- Learner is somewhat disengaged from learning activity (showing low levels of attention and concentration)
- Learner is frequently disengaged and disruptive (showing low levels of attention and concentration, learner does not attend extracurricular activities and does not do homework)
- Learner frequently disrupts the class or shows violent or aggressive behaviour (including suspension for serious misconduct, such as anti-social behaviour, bullying, violence, stealing, substance use, or trouble with the law)

QUICK TIP

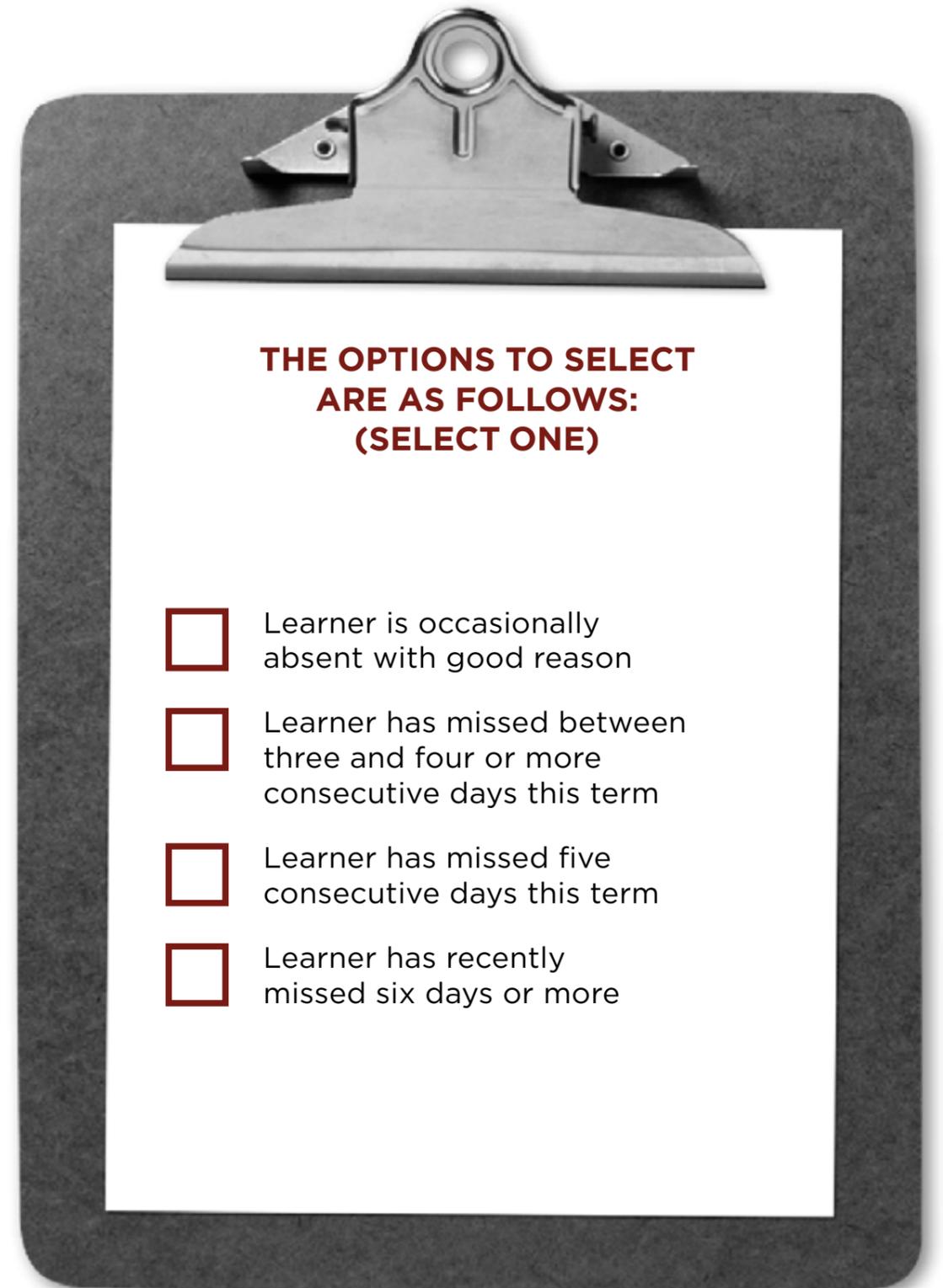
This list marks observations from the lowest to the highest risk levels. The section, 'What should I do with the results?' provides information on what to do if you identify one of these behaviours. Capturing the relevant behaviour on the tool, along with your observations in other dimensions, will start to build a comprehensive view of how this disengagement might be linked with academic and attendance warning signs.

#3

CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM

A learner is considered to have dropped out once they have missed 10 consecutive school days, according to the national attendance policy. After this, there is a process to be followed before the final confirmation is made.² The link between Chronic Absenteeism and dropout is clear. Absenteeism usually increases gradually over time, and noting this can help to bring critical assistance to a learner before they drop out.

End Note ² on page 32



**THE OPTIONS TO SELECT
ARE AS FOLLOWS:
(SELECT ONE)**

- Learner is occasionally absent with good reason
- Learner has missed between three and four or more consecutive days this term
- Learner has missed five consecutive days this term
- Learner has recently missed six days or more

#4 EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

Quality Early Childhood Development (ECD) can assist a child in developing critical cognitive milestones which enable them to engage meaningfully in learning as they progress through school. Sometimes missed milestones in early learning can affect a child's ability to learn and remember information. Having this information about learners can help an educator to understand their starting points. This doesn't necessarily suggest that a lack of quality ECD means a learner cannot excel; it will just help to potentially explain some learning delays, and enable the educator to bring in the right additional support. This is a slightly different type of dimension, as it will not change over time, like the ABCs, but provides a fixed piece of information to better understand a learner. This dimension may also be less relevant for predicting dropout for older learners.

THE OPTIONS TO SELECT ARE AS FOLLOWS: (SELECT ONE)

- Learner attended an ECD centre and received adequate foundations for education
- Learner attended some childcare, but did not receive adequate early learning
- Learner did not attend any ECD centre, or receive any pre-primary education
- There is evidence that the learner experienced substantial deprivation in early learning and care

#5 REPETITION AND DROPOUT

If a learner is repeating the year, or if they have previously dropped out, the evidence shows that they are much more likely to drop out again. The link between repetition and dropout is particularly strong in South African schools. This is a dimension that may change each year, but not every term. Capturing this information will help an educator to quickly identify learners across all dimensions who might be at a greater risk of dropping out.

**THE OPTIONS TO SELECT
ARE AS FOLLOWS:
(SELECT ONE)**

- Learner is not repeating and is on track for the phase
- Learner is repeating for the first time in this phase
- Learner is repeating for the second time in their school career
- Learner has previously dropped out

#6 DISABILITY

Not all disabilities are visible. Some learners may be struggling with mental and physical challenges which they are not likely to overcome without the correct healthcare and therapeutic services, or at all. Having this information about your learners will help you in deciding how best to support a learner - whether it be getting them assistive devices, referring them for further assessment or potentially requesting particular support for Learners with Special Educational Needs (LSEN). If a learner cannot learn for whatever reason, they may begin to disengage, and then drop out.

THE OPTIONS TO SELECT ARE AS FOLLOWS: (SELECT ONE)

- Learner has no disability
- Learner does not have a diagnosed disability but shows signs that there may be something that needs to be investigated
- Learner has some problems participating due to a disability
- Learner has significant difficulty participating in class due to a disability

QUICK TIP

Remember, the first three dimensions are essential, and the last three are optional. Be sure to choose only the dimensions you feel you are interested in capturing information on, or areas that you think there are common challenges for your learners. Having this information will empower you to consult with relevant colleagues to find the support your learners need so that your teaching can take place more smoothly.

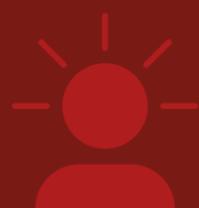


KNOW THIS

WHAT IS DISENGAGED BEHAVIOUR? HOW DOES THIS DIFFER FROM DISRUPTIVE BEHAVIOUR?

As an educator, you know that learners will express any difficulties or challenges they may be facing in different ways. This is where your specific expertise and knowledge of your class is key. When learners face challenges, some may refuse to obey instructions in the classroom; they may create disruptions, while others may withdraw into themselves. This is dependent on a range of individual characteristics. Knowing how to classify what you see is key.

CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING GUIDE:



DISENGAGED BEHAVIOUR

is when you see that learners cannot concentrate, and that they are only processing information on a very shallow level. It seems as if they are not absorbing the information in a meaningful way.



DISRUPTIVE BEHAVIOUR

is any behaviour that prevents the learner's own learning from taking place, as well as behaviour that disrupts and distracts others in the classroom, including yourself, preventing learning from taking place.

Both types of behaviour can be observed in an individual learner, and both are equally concerning. Where disruptive behaviour is easier to identify, disengaged behaviour is more difficult. Any learner who is not motivated to learn, cannot learn, and each one of these learners is at risk of dropping out eventually. Use this tool to identify these behaviours early!



HOW DO I USE THE EXCEL TOOL?

This tool is very easy to use. Begin by simply loading learners onto the tool as key behaviours begin to arise.

Follow these easy steps to make this tool work for you:

1.

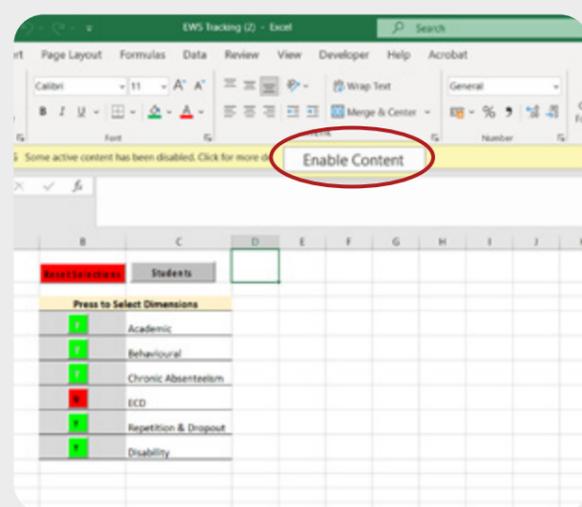
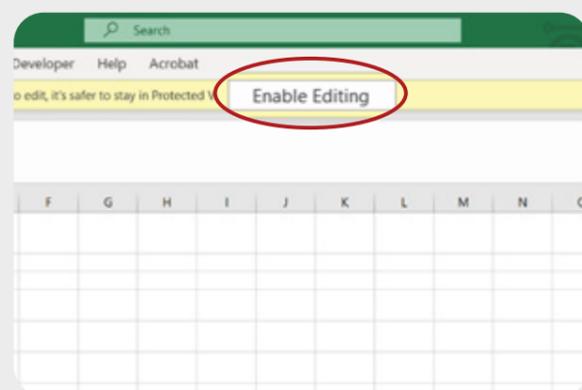
To begin, you will need to have Microsoft Excel on your computer. If you do not have this, ask the school to provide IT support to ensure you have the correct Microsoft Office Programme.

2.

Download the EWS Tool from zerodropout.co.za or download it [here](#), and then open the document once it has finished downloading.

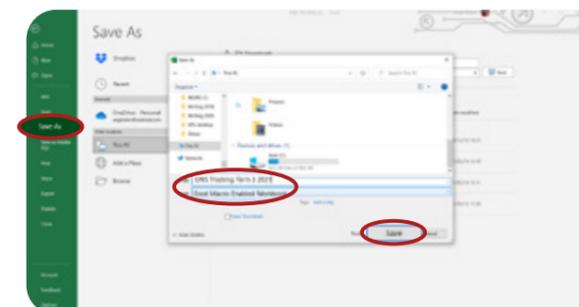
3.

Click **'Enable Editing'**, and then **'Enable Content'** if these boxes appear at the top.



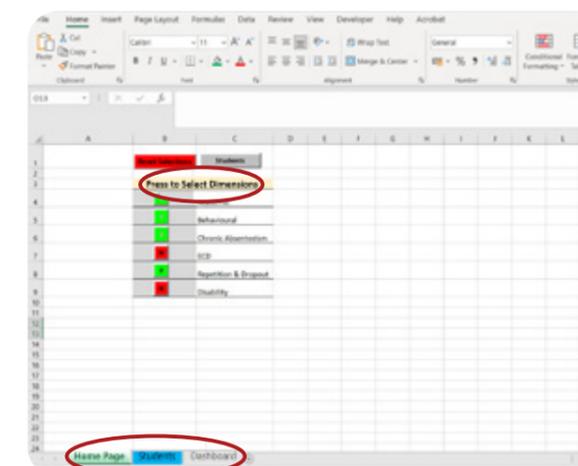
4.

Click **'File'** and then on the dropdown list **'Save As'**. Choose a place to save the file on your computer and then click **'Save'**. You will need to save the file type as **'Excel Macro-Enabled Workbook'**. It is a good idea to save it with the date or term so that you can have different files for each term to track progress. Ideally, save it on a secure drive, or somewhere on your document cloud so you have a backup.



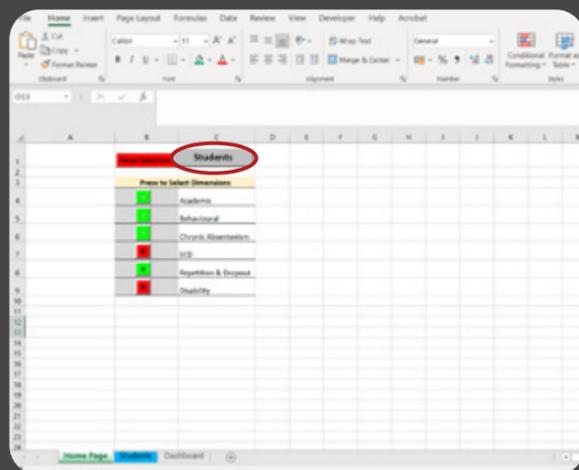
5.

Now the document is good to go. At the bottom, you will see three tabs: **'Home Page'**, **'Students'** and **'Dashboard'**. The document will open on Home Page. The first step is to **select the dimensions** you wish to consider for your class. Academic Performance, Behavioural Issues and Chronic Absenteeism are automatically selected, and you cannot de-select these options as they are the backbone dimensions for any Early Warning System. You can proceed with only these three, or you can select others that may be particularly relevant to your class.



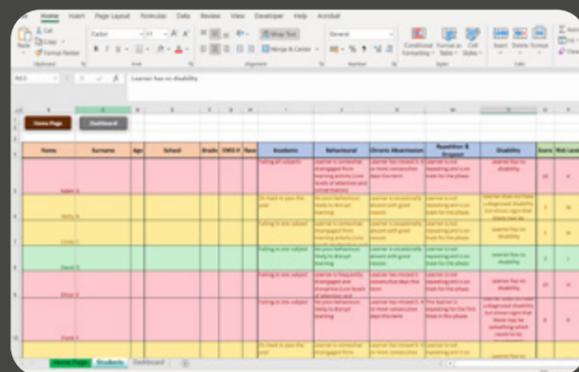
6.

Once you have selected your dimensions, click the button labelled **'Students'**. This will take you to the second tab.



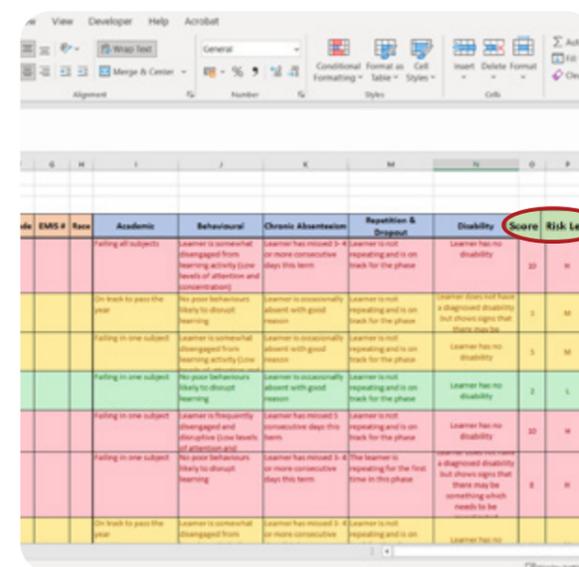
7.

Once you have chosen your dimensions, it's time to start loading learner information. You will need to load the learner's personal details including their name, surname and other demographic information. You should also include their EMIS number. Once you have done this, you can then select the most appropriate statement for that learner against all the selected dimensions. Even if you are loading a learner because of a reason in just one dimension, capture the information across all dimensions so that you can get a clear picture of their overall risk level.



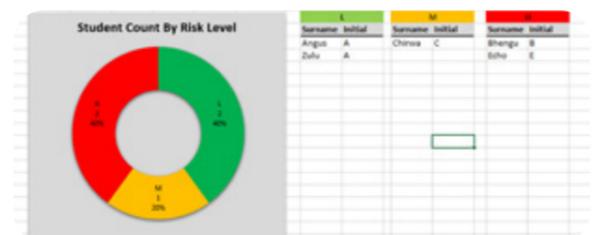
8.

You will see, as you select the appropriate behaviours, that the column labelled **'Score'** will adjust according to your choices. The column labelled **'Risk Level'** will show whether the learner is Low, Medium or High Risk for dropout. Take note of these columns to see which learners are most at risk.



9.

Once you have finished loading all the learners you wish to load (ideally the whole class), and marked the relevant observations across all dimensions, press the **'Dashboard'** button to view a summary. Here you will be able to see how many learners are Low, Medium or High Risk, as well as a quick snapshot list of their names. You can print this sheet and take it with you to School Management Team (SMT) meetings, or to the relevant Head of Department (HOD) to get help for learners in need of it. You can also save these sheets over time, to see whether the overall risk level is improving over the course of the year. You can also provide this information to the educator in the following year, so that they are aware of potential challenges with specific learners, and can help to address these challenges as soon as possible.





WHAT SHOULD I DO WITH THE RESULTS?

As an already overburdened educator, it can be difficult to find the time to call in required services for every learner. This EWS system will help you to develop appropriate and timely interventions to prevent learners from disengaging and dropping out.

This tool will provide you with a clear and quick reference so that you can speak to the principal, the HOD, the SMT, the school counsellor or assigned social worker to get critical support for learners in need. It will help you to advocate for remedial support for learners who are struggling academically, or who potentially need social support.

The availability of a School-based Support Team (SBST) in your school, which, in turn may be linked to a District-based Support Team (DBST) can help you to develop intervention plans for your learners. You may wish to use the tool to reach out to parents if your school has a protocol for conducting home visits. If not a home visit, even a phone call can help to check up on chronically absent learners, or to make parents aware of learning delays that are emerging.

QUICK TIP 🔍

This tool is built to empower you with a clear and consistent way of looking at a complex situation. If the systems to support you to assist your learners are not yet in place in your school, this tool could enable you to make a case for the SMT to begin to develop and strengthen these services.



END NOTES

¹ <https://www.psych4schools.com.au/free-resources/unmotivated-disengaged/>

² Coetzee, S. and Venter, R. (2016: 5). "South African law and policy regulating learner absenteeism at public schools: Supporting an ecosystemic management approach." *South African Journal of Education*, Volume 36, Number 4, November 2016.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Zero Dropout Campaign would like to thank the DG Murray Trust for its continued support in making this toolkit possible.

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“

As a teacher, we have a lot of influence on kids. We don't just teach them the topic we are studying. We teach them the ways of life. We are not only teachers in the class. We are teaching them all aspects of life.

”

- Tamsanqa Ngesi, teacher, Mdantsane in East London, Eastern Cape



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**ACTION
SUMMIT** / Supporting schools
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-  **ZeroXdropout**
-  **Zero Dropout Campaign**
-  **Zero_dropout**
-  **060 054 0000**