



The Silent Crisis

Time to fix South Africa's schools

Executive Summary



Introduction

Nearly 29 years since we became a democracy, the majority of South Africa's learners still do not receive a decent education. This is a longstanding crisis which gets far too little attention.

Government's inability to meaningfully transform basic education is one of democratic South Africa's most grievous failures and an appalling indictment of our society. While the President talks of a 'silent revolution' when celebrating matric results, the majority of young people in our schools are not learning to read, write or add. This renders hollow the promise of empowerment, routes out of poverty and a better life for all.

It is time to shout out loud about this disastrous situation and for all South Africans to mobilise for a much better education for the many millions of learners condemned to attend schools that do not teach very much at all.

In five short reports, CDE reviews the facts concerning our inferior learning outcomes, poor teacher performance, inefficient spending on education, and the Covid-19 shock to the school system. We find that countries that are poorer and spend far less than we do on a per learner basis, such as Kenya and Vietnam, achieve much better results. We analyse the underlying reasons for our dysfunctional system – lack of accountability, corruption, cadre deployment – and make the case that South Africa's low performing system is not immutable or inevitable. It is only through systemwide reform – not projects, not technology, not better infrastructure – that we will achieve the democratic promise of quality 'learning for all'.

Our failing education system (See Report One)

It is important to acknowledge that South Africa achieved improvements in learning outcomes between the early 2000s and the mid-2010s, but this hopeful trajectory has not been sustained.

In 2021, more than half of Grade 1 learners did not know all the letters of the alphabet after a year of schooling. In 2016 (the last time these tests were run), 78 percent of Grade 4 learners could not read for meaning in any language, making it almost impossible for them to catch up no matter what kind of instruction they receive through the rest of their school career. In 2019, only 37 percent of Grade 5 learners had some basic mathematical knowledge.

Then in 2020/21, Covid-19 hugely exacerbated the many challenges already faced by the country's basic education system. The effects of the pandemic can be seen in learning losses of around a year's worth of schooling: today the average 10 year old knows less than the average nine year old before the pandemic.

The impact of these learning losses, especially acute in the foundation years (Grades 1 to 4), will be felt for years to come. The Covid-19 pandemic was the biggest shock to the country's public education system of the democratic era, severely compounding a pre-existing crisis.

South Africa's basic education spending is uniquely inefficient and ineffective. Our spending commitments are equivalent (proportionately) to some high performing Scandinavian countries, such as Finland, but our learning outcomes are worse than neighbouring Eswatini. The

2023 National Budget allocated R294 billion to basic education for the fiscal year, equivalent to 13.5 percent of government expenditure, yet we languish at the bottom of most international education tables – behind developing countries like Morocco, Egypt and Albania that spend far less per capita on education than we do.

In this context, spending more will not make a meaningful difference. As leading education analyst Professor Lant Pritchett puts it, "If your bicycle tyre has a hole, pumping in more air won't do much good... you have to fix the hole first, and then add the air". We need to address the root causes of system dysfunction.

What's wrong with our education system? (See Report Two)

To tackle the root causes of our underperformance, we need an honest diagnosis of the major challenges holding us back. The poverty of learners and their families, the challenging environments in which many schools are located as well as ongoing infrastructural deficits all play a role. However, the critical structural issues within the education system have to be addressed to fundamentally change the way teaching and learning takes place in our classrooms.

There are significant issues regarding the way the system selects, trains, supports and incentivises both existing and incoming teachers. Far too many teachers lack the knowledge and skills to impact learning. Four out of five teachers in public schools lack the content knowledge and pedagogical skills to teach their subjects, and proficiency levels of South African teachers (41%) rank far below that of their peers in Kenya (95%) and Zimbabwe (87%). Many teachers lack motivation to do their jobs properly: South Africa has the highest teacher absenteeism rate of all SADC countries.

There is very little accountability in our vast education system, and this is a primary reason for teacher underperformance. SADTU – the country's dominant teacher union – has agitated against proper performance management for teachers and the national department has caved in time and again. There is a lack of accountability from teachers to principals, from principals to district officials, from district officials to provincial managers, from provinces to the DBE and the DBE to parliament, the President or the country. Public schools are rarely held accountable for their results by School Governing Bodies, parents or the communities in which they are situated.

The forgotten story of state capture in education (See Report Three)

One reason for this poor accountability is that the bureaucracy has been compromised by corruption, cadre deployment and too many incompetent staff members.

A 2016 ministerial task team (MTT) found that in "six and possibly more of the nine provinces ... SADTU is in de facto charge of the management, administration and priorities of education". Despite findings of criminality by the task team, no government official implicated in the 2014 -16 'jobs for cash' scandals has been prosecuted or suspended to this day. Not one of the key MTT recommendations to fight corruption and push back state capture has been implemented.

SADTU membership extends deep into the DBE's bureaucracy. At the time of the MTT's release, all deputy directors general of the DBE were SADTU members, frequently attending union meetings. SADTU's cadre deployment acts as a major barrier to the effective functioning of the education system. It brings people into the bureaucracy who may not be able to do the job; and it creates a set of incentives and an institutional culture in which good, capable people become despondent and incumbent officials who favour the status quo block attempts to reform the system.

Reform is possible: Lessons for education reformers (See Report Four)

In 2011, the DBE launched important reform initiatives, including the Annual National Assessments (ANAs) and the National Education Evaluation and Development Unit (NEEDU). These had some impact, but have been halted or diluted, often in the face of SADTU pressure. Across the world, teacher unions frequently push back against reforms that threaten their members' interests, such as strengthening accountability. South Africa is no exception, although SADTU is particularly powerful given its long-standing ties to the governing party.

With such powerful vested interests, education ministers cannot implement reform on their own. They need the backing of the President of the country, who in turn needs to mobilise and achieve broad public support for the tough actions required to push through major reforms.

Organised business and individual company leaders have a crucial role to play in making the case to South Africans, all their networks, employees, the media and national and provincial government about the importance of systemwide

reform. And then using their resources to help keep up public pressure – from as broad a front of interests as possible – to ensure reform actually happens.

A reforming system needs data: credible, measurable evidence about the impact of change and where further changes are needed. A learning system in both public and private sectors about which education interventions work and which do not, is essential to inform government actions, while giving parents and other pro-reform groups the information they need to hold schools and government accountable.

Holding public education officials, principals and teachers accountable for performance, and providing them with incentives to excel, while avoiding the creation of a climate of fear that will cause resistance to reform measures, is absolutely essential.

Evidence from global studies shows that successful reform programmes can start producing meaningful results in three to five years. One example is Peru. Reforms (testing of teachers and principals, measuring performance through regular data) produced increases of almost eight percent in reading and science and six percent in maths for Grade 3 learners between 2009 and 2015. Between 2012 and 2018 Peru moved from the bottom of the PISA tables to having 12 countries below it, a jump that was the fastest achieved in Latin America. These are the kind of improvements that, if sustained, will get South Africa off the bottom of international standardised testing tables.

Time to fix SA's schools: CDE Recommendations (See Report Five)

The country needs to reconfigure the schooling system so that it delivers a much higher level of learning. We have to move up international comparative tests on maths, reading, science. To get there, a systemwide education reform agenda must be adopted and implemented. CDE focuses on five priorities for action.

Tackle corruption and cadre deployment in the system. Implement many of the recommendations put forward by the current minister's own task team in 2016. These include

protecting whistle-blowers by creating a specialised unit to deal with corruption claims; sending cases to SAPS to prosecute criminality; legally prohibiting cadre deployment; and stopping principals and education officials from being office-bearers of political parties or members of a teachers' union.

Raise accountability levels throughout the system. First, bring back universal ANA tests for Grades 1 to 9, so that this information can be used to support teachers and principals and to hold schools, and senior education leaders, accountable. Second, reinvigorate the school evaluation and development unit (NEEDU) which needs authority to assess and analyse school performance as an independent institution, making information available and accessible to the public and providing annual updates to Parliament on its work. Third, implement the 2012 National Development Plan recommendation to give principals more power over the appointment and management of teachers in their schools. At the same time, principals need to write entrance examinations, undergo competency assessments and have sound performance contracts with education district directors.

Strengthen the teacher corps. Increase university entrance requirements, improve university pre-service teacher training, and introduce entry examinations for the profession. Some 50% of existing teachers will reach retirement age in the next ten years making these recommendations even more important. Simultaneously, provide more support to existing teachers by scaling up cost-effective approaches to upskill educators, something that can only succeed once the capability and accountability levels in the bureaucracy improve. To address teacher shortages, especially in critical areas like maths and science, immediately recruit skilled foreign teachers.

Successful reform requires new leadership in public education. Without a committed, competent and independent team running the education system, real change is unlikely to happen. By pushing the system in the right direction, by setting an example and by making it clear that corruption, cadre deployment and incompetence will no longer be tolerated, the right leaders can achieve big improvements.

South Africa needs a new Minister of Basic Education, DG and top team in the national department to drive and achieve systemwide reform against firm targets and deadlines. It is equally important that MMC's and Heads of Department in charge of PEDs are strong and capable leaders. These new leaders need the President's full support for the tough political decisions essential to improve performance.

Recognize the depth of our learning and teaching crisis and set a realistic series of national goals. We have to move off the bottom of every international test we undertake and set stretch targets to incrementally move up these global tables. Ensuring that all 10 year olds are able to read for meaning is another excellent goal, but for the president's aspiration to achieve results we need a plan, a budget and regular reporting on progress to parliament.

Concluding thoughts

South Africa has a deep crisis in our schooling system and it is long past time that we did something significant about fixing it. We should stop pretending that all is well in our schools just because matric pass rates are slightly better than expected.

Change requires the right diagnosis and political will. The reality is that South Africa has a weak state and an ineffective president.

Education is not a priority and there is no momentum for reform. That means society must up the pressure for better schooling. New momentum for change can be created by the mobilisation of a broad cross-section of leaders outside of government: churches, NGOs, advocacy groups, individuals, civic bodies, parents, principals, teachers and learners, and especially business. These groups need to coalesce around a common set of minimum demands for systemwide reform. In the lead up to the 2024 general election the focus should shift to ensuring that fixing SA's schools is one of the key priorities in the election campaign: voters and media need to force political parties to inform voters on how they will deal with cadre deployment, corruption, accountability and other issues that are essential if we are to drive schooling performance to higher and higher levels.

There will be some people who ask why CDE wants to add another national priority to SA's growing list of absolutely imperative national crises to be fixed. This is an important question. However, we would respond by asking this: **Are you prepared to condemn another generation of young South Africans to an appalling education?**

It is time to act and significantly improve the dismal education we provide in the majority of our public schools today.

See the five reports available on CDE's website (www.cde.org.za)

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