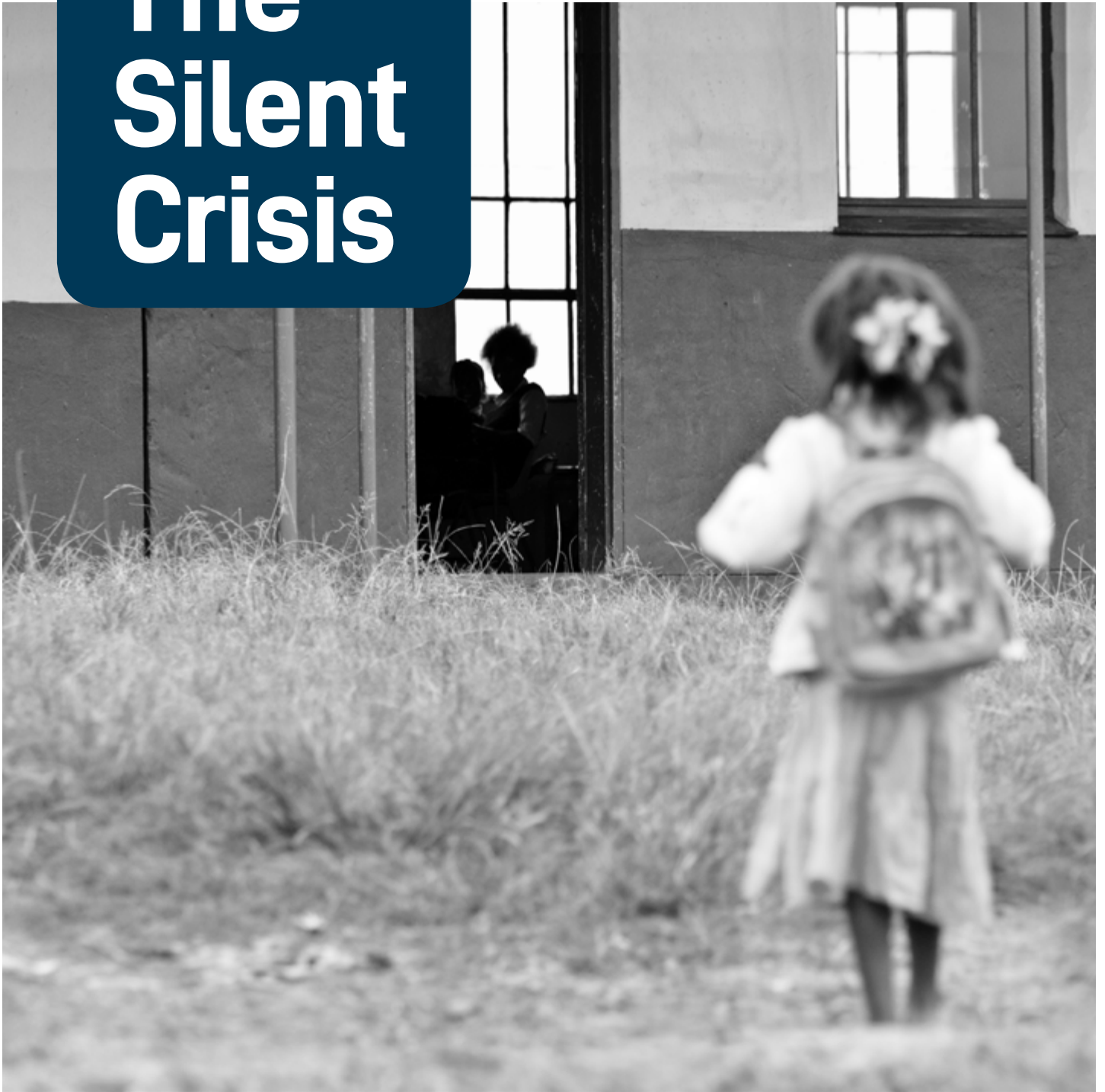


# The Silent Crisis



**FIVE**

**Time to fix  
South Africa's  
schools**



## **About CDE**

The Centre for Development and Enterprise (CDE), an independent policy research and advocacy organisation, is South Africa's leading development think tank. Since its establishment in 1995, CDE has been gathering evidence, generating innovative policy recommendations, and consulting widely on issues critical to economic growth, employment and democratic consolidation. By examining South African and international experience, CDE formulates practical policy proposals outlining ways in which South Africa can tackle major social and economic challenges.

CDE has a special focus on the role of business and markets in development. CDE disseminates its research and proposals to a national audience of policymakers, opinion formers and the wider public through printed and digital publications, which receive extensive media coverage. Our track record of successful engagement enables CDE to bring together experts and stakeholders to debate the policy implications of research findings.

Series Editor: Ann Bernstein

This report was written by CDE research director Dr Stefan Schirmer and policy analyst Rehan Visser.

Photo credit: A young South African girl stands outside of school, nervous to enter on her first day of class, by Getty Images

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## **The Silent Crisis**

The failure to meaningfully transform South Africa's dysfunctional schooling system, despite significant public expenditure, is the quiet crisis and disaster of the democratic era. Tragically, while some reform measures in the 2000s proved successful, these gains did not last and have now been reversed during Covid. South Africa remains at the bottom of all international tables on learning outcomes: reading, maths, science. As a result, the majority of poor, mainly black, children in South Africa still do not receive the education they need to escape poverty. This is a national emergency that must be addressed.

In this series of reports, CDE identifies the root cause of this failure and makes the case for fundamental, systemwide reform that focuses on improving the quality of learning in the classroom. South Africa needs a President committed to education reform as a priority and a Minister and team of education leaders who can design and implement an effective reform agenda. This will require decisions that disrupt the status quo and those who benefit from the current dysfunction. It will also require all those South Africans who will benefit from and care about a much more effective and more equal education system of good quality, to mobilise in favour of reform.

This report is one of five in a CDE series on diagnosis, priorities and recommendations for basic education reform.

- ONE: South Africa's failing education system
- TWO: What's wrong with our education system?
- THREE: The forgotten story of state capture in education
- FOUR: Lessons for education reformers
- **FIVE: Time to fix South Africa's schools**

## List of acronyms in this series

ANA	Annual National Assessment
CAPS	Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement
DAS	Development Appraisal System
EE	Equal Education
EGRS	Early Grade Reading Study
FET	Further Education and Training
HLO	Harmonised Learning Outcomes
IQMS	Integrated Quality Management System
MPAT	Management Performance Assessment Tool
NAPTOSA	National Professional Teachers' Organisation of South Africa
NECT	National Education Collaboration Trust
NEEDU	National Education Evaluation and Development Unit
NEIMS	National Education Infrastructure Management System
NIAF	National Integrated Assessment Framework
NIDS-CRAM	National Income Dynamics Study – Coronavirus Rapid Mobile Survey
NSNP	National School Nutrition Programme
PEU	Professional Educators' Union
PILO	Programme to Improve Learning Outcomes
PIRLS	Progress in International Reading Literacy Study
PISA	Program for International Student Assessment
SACE	South African Council for Educators
SACMEQ	Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality
SADC	Southern African Development Community
SEA	Schools Evaluation Authority
SNTE	Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación
TIMSS	Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study
UNE	Unión Nacional de Educadores

# Time to fix South Africa's schools

## Introduction

In this series of reports, CDE has set out the extent, the causes and the consequences of our education system's devastating underperformance. We cannot continue failing generation after generation of learners in this way.

In this final report, we summarise the case for reforming the basic education system and put forward the key priorities for action to move the country away from the bottom of almost every international performance table.

In the first section, we highlight the realities making it imperative that fundamental reforms are urgently implemented, especially in the wake of the setbacks created by Covid-19. We remind readers of this series how badly our schools perform, given what we spend on them. We describe the lack of accountability across the system, the pervasiveness of corruption, nepotism, conflicts of interest and the totally inadequate way that teachers are supported and trained.

In the second section, we acknowledge that there have been some positive initiatives, both from within the DBE and from the private sector, to address some of the factors holding back the education system. We argue that while many are valuable, they do not address the challenges at the heart of our poor performance. Overall, reform efforts have either not been sustained, have failed to deliver at scale or at all, or have focussed on the wrong priorities.

In the third section, we spell out the essential steps to achieve systemwide reform. In CDE's view there are four priority areas for immediate action. If these were implemented the country could start pushing the levels of learning onto a sustainable upward trajectory. These priority action areas are focussed on raising the learning levels in classrooms across the country. To have the desired impact they need to be taken on together and acted upon in a systematic and coordinated way.

Finally, we conclude by calling for the urgent adoption of this package of reform priorities. South Africa's poor record of leadership and implementation inspires little confidence that a dramatic, systemwide and sustained push for reform will emerge very soon. These kinds of reforms are also likely to be staunchly opposed by vested interests who feel threatened by them. We therefore call for the mobilisation of a broad cross-section of leaders outside of government – civil society, parents, business and many others – to support this vision for change and help increase the pressure on government and the basic education department to adopt a determined and fundamental approach to moving South Africa's education system onto a much improved trajectory.

**“Overall, reform efforts have either not been sustained, have failed to deliver at scale or at all, or have focussed on the wrong priorities”**

## Why South Africa needs systemwide reform in basic education

South Africa's education bureaucracy is large and complex. The Department of Basic Education (DBE) consists of more than 700 people and oversees nine provincial education departments (PEDs), which are collectively in charge of more than 80 education districts.<sup>1</sup> This bureaucratic machinery is responsible for more than 25 000 public schools – each with its own school governing body (SGB). PEDs employ all South Africa's 320 000 public school teachers.<sup>2</sup> From Grade R to 12, the public school system in 2022 must teach some 13 million learners.<sup>3</sup> This requires extensive coordination and significant leadership and management capabilities; characteristics that are, at best, distributed unevenly across the state. Probably one of the largest management challenges in the country, we know that this system is neither delivering acceptable outcomes, nor is it functioning properly.

### The extent of our underachievement

Although there has been some progress in learning outcomes between the start of the century and the mid-2010s, this progress seems to have levelled off. It also has not done nearly enough to address the extremely poor education received by the vast majority of pupils in South Africa. To illustrate:

- Almost a third of all Grade 2 learners do not know all the letters of the alphabet midway through the year.<sup>4</sup>
- Less than half of Grade 6 learners tested could achieve the Grade 3 benchmark in reading fluency.<sup>5</sup>
- In nearly half of all secondary schools, not a single child could achieve the intermediate benchmark in an international mathematics assessment. Such schools produce virtually no learning. In Botswana, by contrast, only 2 percent of schools perform this badly.<sup>6</sup>

As if this were not bad enough, Covid-19 has severely impacted the entire system, with school closures, rotational timetabling, absenteeism and illness contributing to significant learning losses, measured at around a year of normal schooling. Experts calculate that outcomes will only return to the pre-pandemic trajectory in 2032, if no attempts are made to intervene.<sup>7</sup> Learning losses at a foundational level can have a cascading impact across a child's life. Weaker learners are more likely to drop out in Grades 10 through 12. Dropping out or performing more poorly have knock-on effects on potential lifetime earnings.<sup>8</sup> The case for reform was very strong before the pandemic. It is now an urgent national imperative.

**“The case for reform was very strong before the pandemic. It is now an urgent national imperative”**

### We spend too much for what we get

Every year 13.5 percent of government expenditure is directed towards basic education, R294 billion in 2023.<sup>9</sup> The country requires and deserves much better performance for its investment. South African teachers are well paid in comparison with their peers in richer countries, earning on average R42,700 per month before tax, including benefits.<sup>10</sup> Of OECD countries, only Germany and Luxembourg pay their teachers better.<sup>11</sup> Paying teachers well is a good idea but we should be demanding much more from them in return.

### Teachers are badly trained and supported

South African teachers have very weak subject knowledge. While 87 percent of Grade 6 mathematics teachers in Zimbabwe have 'good proficiency' in mathematics, this number is only 41 percent for South African teachers.<sup>12</sup> If teaching standards are not vastly improved, it cannot be expected that learning outcomes will improve. Half of all teachers are expected to retire by 2030 which opens up an unprecedented opportunity to train a younger cohort of teachers much better.<sup>13</sup> The aim must be to change how teachers teach and what they teach as soon as possible.

However, teachers operate within a particular context. The lack of accountability across our system, stretching through national and provincial bureaucracies, and extending to principals and teachers, acts as a significant barrier preventing education officials, managers, principals and teachers from doing their jobs properly. An environment in which very few people are held to account for their underperformance ensures that teachers do not get sufficient support, and makes them feel neglected, while allowing many to decide that barely sufficient is enough to get by.

### **Accountability deficits exist across the system**

The DBE acknowledged in 2020 that there exists "insufficient discipline and accountability in the system, from the classroom up to the offices of some senior managers in the administration".<sup>14</sup> However, it is not clear what they have been doing about it in recent years.

Earlier attempts to introduce effective accountability instruments met stiff resistance. Teachers, especially those represented by the South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU), the most powerful union, successfully diluted all teacher performance management initiatives from 1998 onwards. Other positive proposals have similarly been halted or diluted. The Annual National Assessment (ANA) tests – the only nationwide standardised assessments learners wrote, from 2012 to 2015 – were halted, largely at the behest of SADTU. The National Education Evaluation and Development Unit (NEEDU), a statutory body tasked with identifying challenges holding back system performance, was stripped of its independence and has been rendered largely moribund. As a result, education leaders, the national department, parliament, experts, businesses, parents and other groups with a direct stake in improving the learning outcomes of our schools are denied the necessary information to hold schools, principals and teachers and ultimately the leadership of the department and the government as a whole accountable for their performance. The international evidence compellingly demonstrates that, for improvements in service delivery to occur, accountability is essential.

**"The DBE acknowledged in 2020 that there exists insufficient discipline and accountability in the system, from the classroom up to the offices of some senior managers in the administration"**

### **Corruption, nepotism and conflicts of interest are the enemies of system improvement**

Extensive bribery, extortion and nepotism in basic education was confirmed by a ministerial task team (MTT) in 2016. Highly sought-after positions like principal and deputy principal were being sold for money, sex or livestock. The same team's investigation also found that the South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU) is "in *de facto* charge of the management, administration and priorities of education" in "six and possibly more of the nine provinces".<sup>15</sup> The report concluded that SADTU thus had "enormous power and influence" over the education system.

This is a profound conclusion given that nearly half of all education personnel in the country, including administrative and managerial staff, as well as teachers in public schools, are SADTU members.<sup>16</sup> In the absence of evidence to the contrary, we can only assume that the 'capture' of much of the education bureaucracy by SADTU continues to this day. It is unacceptable that managers of educators belong to the same unions as those they are managing. This is a fundamental conflict of interests that prevents the emergence of a meritocratic, well-functioning system.

The 2016 MTT report resulted in promises for action by the minister and DG. However, according to the chairman of the MTT Professor John Volmink none of the recommendations of the task team have been implemented. And according to Corruption Watch's latest report in August 2022, corruption is still pervasive across the system.<sup>18</sup>

## Why current approaches to reform don't move the dial

There are many disparate initiatives in basic education that look to improve learning outcomes. CDE has previously argued that business needs to strengthen its commitment to education reform. Encouragingly, many efforts have been made to heed our call for more strategic thinking and more collaborative efforts to contribute to real system change. However, the best of these, which have shown moderately positive impact, have been smaller in scale, while large-scale interventions have seen minimal gains.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps the most positive large-scale experiment is the Early Grade Reading Study's (EGRS) coaching intervention, which has recorded gains equivalent of 40 percent of a school year. However, it is not certain how cost-effective it would be to roll out this fairly expensive initiative, or whether the results could be sustained if introduced across the whole system.<sup>18</sup>

The reality is that, by themselves, these efforts are not capable of taking South Africa to a new level of learning unless they are taken to scale and accompanied by fundamental reforms that change how the system trains, supports and incentivises teachers. Even the experts who have played a leading role in getting the EGRS off the ground are aware of these limitations. Professor Nic Spaul and Dr Stephen Taylor doubt that progress with respect to reading improvements can be realised and sustained unless systemwide reforms are implemented. Professor Brahm Fleisch put it succinctly when he said experiments are "a necessary but not sufficient condition" of improvement.<sup>19</sup>

## DBE's spotty reform record

The DBE has sporadically committed itself to reform but has generally focussed on the kinds of reforms that have not been opposed by vested interests, especially SADTU. Some of these reforms have probably had a positive impact, including the more effective delivery of textbooks, curriculum reform (especially CAPS) and the use of standardised workbooks. Unfortunately, the initiatives that, all the research indicates, would have had the most potential to bring about significant change, have all been abandoned by the DBE in the face of determined SADTU opposition. These include: attempts to introduce proper performance management processes for teachers and principals, the introduction of standardised universal assessments in certain grades (ANAs), and the creation of a school inspection unit (NEEDU). Sticking with or following through on these interventions without watering them down would have made a big difference to the overall performance of the schooling system and would have created a better environment for the implementation of further reforms.

**"SADTU is in *de facto* charge of the management, administration and priorities of education in six and possibly more of the nine provinces"**



### **The move towards technical and vocational education**

Two reforms that could potentially restructure the South African schooling system are the introduction of a Grade 9 exit certificate and the new three-stream curriculum currently on trial for Grades 10 to 12. The General Education Certificate (GEC) started in 2022, with a full rollout expected in 2024. The idea is to allow learners who will not further their school studies to leave the system in search of training or employment. It is expected that this will reduce system inefficiencies such as grade repetition. In addition to the 'standard' academic stream, the new curriculum will allow for 26 new subjects under the occupational stream (from upholstery to hairdressing) and 12 new subjects under the vocational stream (from consumer, retail and hospitality studies to various types of technology subjects). The occupational subjects comprise 75 percent practical work and 25 percent theoretical work, while the split for vocational subjects is down the middle. These subjects are set to be rolled out for Grades 10 to 12 by 2025.

Whether the Grade 9 exit certificate will be viewed as a useful marker of skills by potential employers remains to be seen. CDE believes that the three-stream curriculum is a step in the right direction towards making South Africa's youth more employable, by providing them with practical knowhow desired by employers. However, this not insignificant step will do little to change prospects for the great majority of young people if the effectiveness of our post-school education and training system does not improve and economic reforms to increase the demand for semi-skilled labour are not adopted.

None of this diminishes the need for wholesale changes to the education system to improve education delivery. Finally, we need to guard against the pressure for weaker schools to adopt vocational subjects simply because they are less academically demanding, thereby reinstating apartheid-era stratification of the education system.

CDE, 2023

### **Have we made progress?**

There is evidence that South Africa's performance in international benchmark assessments improved between the early 2000s and the mid-2010s. Education researcher Professor Martin Gustafsson has demonstrated, using internationally comparative data, that these advances are near the 'speed limit' of the fastest possible rate of improvement we can expect, given how fast other countries have improved.<sup>20</sup>

There is some debate about how extensive and sustained this progress has been, but the most concerning issue is that although performance in key subjects improved between the early 2000s and the mid-2010s, it was off such a low base that these improvements have hardly affected South Africa's performance relative to other

countries.<sup>21</sup> We continue to languish at or near the bottom of the TIMSS (mathematics and science) and PIRLS (reading) tables. There are also signs that progress had hit a ceiling and was tapering off before Covid hit. The pandemic then reversed previous learning gains by creating, on average, more than a year of learning losses.

### Key insights about effective reform

Current efforts to improve learning are insufficient. It makes little sense to try and improve bits of basic education when key components of this vast system are fundamentally dysfunctional. We have to tackle the core issues if we are to see the change we need. That means reforming the whole system.

Shifting the whole system requires a series of coordinated, interlocking efforts to change how this system performs.<sup>22</sup> That means taking our reform energies beyond specific classroom-level interventions, essential though these are. Reform must be rooted in a recognition that teachers operate within a particular context. This context, especially the bureaucracy, but also the wider society's views of education and the teaching profession, shapes incentives and behaviour, and therefore has a central impact on how teachers do their job. Education experts, local and abroad, doubt that real progress can be realised and sustained unless systemwide reforms emerge.<sup>23</sup>

**“We have to tackle the core issues if we are to see the change we need. That means reforming the whole system”**

CDE's argument is therefore that unless we tackle the underlying causes of system failure – lack of accountability, corruption, cadre deployment, conflicts of interest and poor teaching standards – we will not move the needle on what matters most: getting the majority of all learners to actually learn.

From our review of reform efforts in many other countries, a number of lessons and insights are key for advancing learning as quickly as possible:

- **Political leadership is needed to drive reform.** Reforming a complex system requires leadership and management. It is easier to spend political capital on difficult to implement and easy to resist reforms if political leaders are given a mandate by the public.
- **A broad coalition of civil society actors must support reform.** International experience reveals that change can happen if a dedicated and coordinated set of actors – from parents to academics – share their strengths to demand and monitor reform. We need to bring all these actors together to push consistently for systemwide reform.
- **The private sector should play a leadership role.** Business is a crucial voice in the fight for reform. It has much more to offer than funding alone, from organisational skills, strategic views and innovative approaches to changing the national conversation on how to fix public schooling. Too much attention is still focussed on projects and initiatives and far too little on the necessity for reforming a failing education system.
- **Information drives decision making.** Measurable, credible evidence is crucial. Getting data on learner performance and what drives it is crucial to support teachers and principals in their efforts to improve their performance, and to hold those in charge of the system accountable. Distributing information on learner or school results to all interested parties including parents and local communities is important for their ability to hold school-based educators to account. An education reform unit in or adjacent to the

Presidency that communicates the need for reform based on evidence is a key feature of other successful cases of system overhaul.

- **Teachers are essential reform partners.** Any reform depends on involving teachers in the process. They are at the coalface of learning and thus need to support and internalise new systems and procedures. A critical balance must be struck between holding teachers to account for their performance and avoiding the creation of a climate of fear that will cause resistance to reform measures. Incorporating these various elements into a reform agenda is the best way of achieving the kind of sustained success that will start to generate real and rapid improvements in a few years' time.

## Priority areas for action

On the basis of the analysis in this report and insight into international experience and building on extensive discussions with leading education reform experts, both in South Africa and abroad, CDE has identified changes in four priority areas that are most likely to produce the sustained, incremental improvements the country's learners need and deserve. These priority areas have been identified to target the root causes of system dysfunction.

For the best chances of success, these reforms must be seen as a 'package deal' and considered in conjunction. This is extremely important, as the best cases of education reform successes from around the world have involved a combination of complementary reforms introduced in a sustained way.

**"It is essential that we find cost-effective ways to upskill existing teachers"**

It is important to note that none of these proposed reforms is extreme, or radically new. All of them, including the idea that strong leadership is vital, have either been supported, briefly or partially implemented, or proposed by the department or by state entities like the National Planning Commission (NPC). By now there is widespread and growing support for these reforms amongst most educationists. The critical requirement is to implement them together and to stick with the programme.

### **ONE: An education system is only as good as its teachers**

Teachers are at the coalface of education. Thus, any system reform programme must include changing the way that teachers teach. Most South African teachers are ill-prepared and poorly equipped to execute their core duties. CDE recommends that the DBE takes steps to improve the performance of both current and future teachers and fills key gaps by immediately recruiting experienced, foreign teachers.

- **Provide more support to existing teachers:** It is essential that we find cost-effective ways to upskill existing teachers. Particular attention needs to be paid to how current proposals and practices, if successful, can be scaled up and applied countrywide. This will require identifying the teachers that need help the most, which in turn will depend on better and more granular data about teacher performance than we have at present. We should be thinking especially about how Covid-19's enforced changes to teaching methodologies could be utilised to positive effect. Simple technological solutions, such as sharing pedagogical techniques and learning materials over WhatsApp groups, could potentially improve teaching efficacy while keeping costs to a minimum.<sup>24</sup> However, the success of these interventions will depend heavily on the broader systemwide reforms we are advocating. A better run bureaucracy will be able to coordinate and deliver teacher support

and training much more effectively than is currently the case. Creating better incentive structures for teachers, including better performance management processes and pay progressions linked to improved learner outcomes, can help motivate teachers to seek out and commit fully to available on-the-job training programmes. This will be resisted by SADTU, but the success of experimental pilots may generate momentum for the broader implementation of these reforms.

**“The way we train our teachers must be significantly improved so that those who enter the profession in future are capable of doing the job they are paid to do”**

- **Improve the teaching cohort of the future:** The way we train our teachers must be significantly improved so that those who enter the profession in future are capable of doing the job they are paid to do. Several education experts have pointed out that we should use the impending shortage of teachers as an opportunity for reform and a significant change in our teaching corps. CDE supports education expert Dr Nick Taylor's proposals that entry requirements for teaching qualifications be raised and that momentum is maintained on the ongoing efforts to improve curricula for B.Ed programmes around the country. This should be implemented urgently to capitalise on the looming teacher retirement wave. One option that could be explored to train a larger cohort of new teachers is to create more opportunities for this to be done through private institutions. It is also worth exploring whether examinations for teaching hopefuls should be standard practice, as it is with the legal profession, to ensure minimum subject content competence.
- **Encourage and enable more foreign teachers to work in SA:** South Africa faces a looming teacher retirement wave: half of the country's existing teacher cohort is expected to retire by 2030. Extensive anecdotal evidence indicates that we already face a shortage of teachers, especially experienced, skilled mathematics and science teachers. Part of the immediate solution is to encourage more foreign teachers to teach in South Africa. If teacher entrance exams are introduced, they should be open to individuals of any nationality, so that the only requirement to teach in South Africa is the ability to pass these exams (in English). This is important not only for increasing quality but also the supply of teachers, given that 49 percent of current teachers are expected to retire by 2030. The DBE should actively seek to attract experienced English-speaking mathematics and science teachers from other countries, for whom South African salaries will be a big attraction. India for example is a country where numerous agencies will very quickly provide SA with the teachers that we need. Sadly, the recent removal of foreign teachers in the North West and Limpopo suggests moves may be afoot to head in precisely the opposite direction, to the detriment, once again, of learners.

## **TWO: Accountability is essential for better results**

South Africa needs measures that will give public servants the power they need to be fully responsible for their actions. The reforms CDE suggests below can go some way towards introducing genuine accountability from within the schooling system. These measures need to be communicated appropriately towards those charged with implementing them. They will not be fully effective unless they are internalised by those who carry them out. Teachers, principals and education officials thus have to buy into the reforms.

- **Bring back the universal ANA tests:** The international literature is clear that data play an important role in improving accountability. While it is true that the ANA tests possessed some technical deficiencies, these could have been overcome over time. The case for ending them entirely seems wholly unjustified.

Sample-based assessments in Grades 3, 6 and 9 have been reintroduced but these are not sufficient to hold teachers, principals, district officials and senior leadership to account for results under their jurisdiction, as they will likely only be made available to academics and other researchers and anyway do not cover individual schools. A reworked set of universal ANA tests could provide significant impetus for accountability. If the school and district-level results of these assessments are made easily accessible to the public, parents and others will be empowered to place external pressure on principals and teachers to perform well. The possibility of punitive action for a sustained lack of performance, based on certain reasonable, objective measures, is a necessary accountability mechanism. Within this principle, room must be made for taking into account the difficult conditions within which teachers operate. In addition, although the possibility of remedial action is key, it is important not to make the stakes too high, as this will lead to teachers resisting and gaming the results. Using the results to give teachers and principals feedback to improve their performance could also have positive impact.

**“The DBE should reintroduce the shelved NEEDU Bill to constitute it as an independent institution”**

- **Reinvigorate NEEDU and ensure its independence:** NEEDU should be revitalised. NEEDU was set up in 2011 “to provide the minister of education with an authoritative, accurate, analytical account on the state of schools”. After a good start, opposition to its independence resulted in its decline and it became largely moribund, issuing sporadic briefings with little noticeable effect. To resuscitate it, the DBE should reintroduce the shelved NEEDU Bill to constitute it as an independent institution (i.e., not part of the DBE) that regularly assesses progress on the extent to which reforms have been implemented, giving annual updates directly to Parliament and to the public. NEEDU reports on school investigations should be publicly available, and Parliament must play a role in pressuring the DBE into implementing recommended changes. The new NEEDU should play a supportive role by recommending appropriate remedial action. To supplement the efforts of this re-invigorated national body, provinces should launch their own school evaluation systems. An example of this that could be replicated and adapted to other provinces is the Western Cape’s School Evaluation Authority (SEA). This newly empowered independent inspectorate can visit schools at two days’ notice. The focus is on working with principals and heads of divisions to tackle identified weaknesses, although classroom visits are also undertaken.
- **Give principals more responsibility:** Principals need to be given greater power over which teachers are under their command. This is the first line of accountability flowing upwards from the classroom, and thus perhaps the most important. Without sufficient control of what happens in their schools, it will be difficult to hold principals to account, either from inside the education system (by district directors, PEDs and so on) or from outside the education system (by parents and local communities). The National Development Plan 2030 (NDP) recommended that principals undergo competency assessments and obtain entry-level qualifications. CDE wholeheartedly supports these proposals to introduce merit into principal recruitment processes, as well as calls to introduce sound performance management contracts for principals to be overseen by district officials. These two actions could help turn the education system into a meritocracy. The NDP also called for “union influence over the promotion and appointment of principals” to be “eliminated”, which would require the DBE and PEDs to develop the necessary human resources management capacity to undertake these processes fairly.<sup>25</sup> This is a critical component of enhancing accountability in the system. Of course holding the government and the provincial premiers accountable for the quality of education and

steady improvement of South African learners' performance in international comparative tests is also a critical component of accountability that the country desperately needs.

### **THREE: Corruption and cadre deployment must be tackled**

SADTU's dominance of the education sector is the elephant in the room. No one wants to talk about it, especially those who have the power to do something about it. Nor is this issue raised by many in civil society or advocacy NGOs. Given SADTU's sway, most education experts organisations and reformers within the DBE have understandably preferred to make changes deemed acceptable to SADTU in the hope they can make progress without confrontation.

South Africa needs to make deeper and faster progress in learning to achieve our national goals and start catching up to our peer countries. To achieve this, it is imperative that we root out corruption and dismantle patronage networks in the education bureaucracy. Failure to do this will mean that stakeholders who have captured large parts of the system will agitate against other reforms addressed at teachers, principals and education officials. It will take strong political will to implement the recommendations of the 2016 MTT report that confirmed the existence of pervasive corruption, clientelism and conflicts of interest across the schooling system – something the minister and the director-general of basic education promised to do when the report was released some seven years ago.

**“Accountability must start with government leaders. A new basic education minister with fresh energy and a clear plan of action they are determined to carry out is therefore crucial”**

The minister of basic education and provincial education MECs need urgently to implement the key MTT recommendations. This will not happen unless the President makes this a key part of the national drive against corruption thus giving his and Cabinet's full support and backing to the minister, premiers and education MECs. The key recommendations are:

- Take a public stand against corruption in the education department
- Send cases to SAPS to prosecute criminality
- Protect whistle-blowers
- Regain control of the PEDs
- Take measures to prevent future employment-related extortion
- Remove conflicts of interest by legally prohibiting cadre deployment <sup>26</sup>

Taking these steps will send a strong signal that the system is shifting away from a culture of corruption and incompetence towards one of fairness and merit and is placing the interests of learners (as well as those of dedicated, ethical teachers) at the very centre of its concerns.

### **FOUR: The education system needs new leadership**

As successful examples from elsewhere demonstrate, implementing systemwide reform requires a strong, capable, independent and ethical leadership group. This has to start at the very top with the President of the country, the minister of basic education and the top team of officials involved in making sure that the reforms happen.

CDE believes – with many others in the education sector – that it is time for a new minister in charge of basic education with a dynamic team of senior managers, committed to real change in the country's education results.

We need national leadership to inspire and 'sell' a new vision of what we can and should achieve in basic education and how important this is for our future. The country needs the experience and excellence in education management to ensure the various areas of change are implemented. Without this, the fundamental changes required are unlikely to take hold. By pushing the system in the right direction, by setting an example and by making it clear that nefarious activities and incompetence will no longer be tolerated, the right leaders can achieve big improvements.

Accountability must start with government leaders. A new basic education minister with fresh energy and a clear plan of action they are determined to carry out is therefore crucial. Given the political economy of education in South Africa, where SADTU forms a partner to the ruling African National Congress (ANC), basic education ministers cannot implement reform on their own, at least not while the ANC is in government. Systemwide reform must therefore be backed by the President of the country, who in turn needs to mobilise and achieve support from provincial premiers and their education departments and broad public support for the tough actions required to fundamentally reform the education system.

**“Basic education ministers cannot implement reform on their own, at least not while the ANC is in government. Systemwide reform must therefore be backed by the President of the country”**

## Conclusion: Making reform happen

Implementing and coordinating as many of these initiatives as possible across the system is the best chance we have of fundamentally changing the way our dysfunctional education system works, with potentially massive benefits for millions of children and the prospect of a more inclusive South Africa. But how can we get a reform programme off the ground when we have a weak state with an uninspiring track record, entrenched vested interests ready to oppose reforms and rising levels of social and political instability?

As successful examples from elsewhere demonstrate, implementing systemwide reform requires a strong, capable and ethical leadership group. A new basic education minister and a new director-general, supported by the President and Operation Vulindlela, need to work together to drive systemwide reform by bringing together all the key actors in education: teachers, parents, learners, education NGOs, business, academics and education experts and, through the media, the public at large. The list of reforms CDE has proposed should be a starting point for getting learning to accelerate as quickly as possible.

Reformers should take heart from the fact that several Latin American countries have confronted similar challenges and were able to overcome them. From this experience, we found that it is indeed possible for fundamental education reforms to produce, in a relatively short space of time, real improvements in learning. What it requires is strong demand from society (or as many stakeholders as possible) for better schooling. Groups who have a powerful stake in better performing schools, especially parents and business, need to become a louder, more consistent voice, while leaders who are ready to heed those voices must commit themselves strongly and openly to a reform process.

Reform of the basic education system must be recognised for the urgent national priority it is. We cannot condemn yet another generation of learners to the abysmal schooling that characterises far too many South African schools.

## **The Silent Crisis**

- Report 1: Presents key facts about our uniquely underperforming education system, with a particular focus on our comparative learning failures and the scale of the challenge.
- Report 2: Identifies the root causes of system dysfunction and analyses why we need system reform.
- Report 3: Shows how corruption and cadre deployment by unions undermines the education bureaucracy's ability to deliver learning.
- Report 4: Explores the challenges and opportunities for reform by looking at recent case studies from Latin America and elsewhere.
- Report 5: Summarises CDE's findings and sets out our priorities for action.



## Endnotes

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- <sup>13</sup> Poppie Ntaka, 'Are provinces hiring the additional teachers that universities produce?', *Research on Socio-economic Policy* (10 November 2022).
- <sup>14</sup> Department of Basic Education, *Action plan to 2024: Towards the realisation of Schooling 2030* (August 2020), p. 5.
- <sup>15</sup> Department of Basic Education, *Report of the Ministerial Task Team appointed by Minister Angie Motshekga to investigate allegations into the selling of posts of educators by members of teachers unions and departmental officials in provincial education departments* (18 May, 2016), 106.
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- <sup>26</sup> For more detail on these recommendations, see report THREE in this series.

## CDE Publications on Education

- No Longer Business as Usual: Private sector efforts to improve schooling in South Africa**, November 2020
- Teacher professional standards for South Africa: The road to better performance, development and accountability?**, August 2017
- Teacher Evaluation: Lessons from other countries**, September 2015
- Teacher evaluation in South African schools**, September 2015
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- International best practice in schooling reform: What can South Africa learn from other countries?**, September 2009
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- From laggard to world class: Reforming maths and science education in South Africa's schools**, November 2004
- Schooling in South Africa: Are we making any progress?**, April 1997



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