

# NATIONAL ASSEMBLY

## FOR WRITTEN REPLY QUESTION 691

**DATE OF PUBLICATION IN INTERNAL QUESTION PAPER: 19-06-2006**  
**(INTERNAL PAPER NO. 18-2006)**

### **Mr. G G Boinamo to ask the Minister of Education:**

- (1) What was the total number of learners who (a) commenced grade one in (i) 1991, (ii) 1992, (iii) 1993 and (iv) 1994 and (b) completed matric in (i) 2002, (ii) 2003, (iii) 2004 and (iv) 2005;
- (2) What reasons has she identified for the high drop-out rate of learners from schools;
- (3) Whether she has taken any steps to tackle this problem; if not why not; if so, (a) what steps and (b) with what results?

### **REPLY:**

- (1) The total number of learners who (a) commenced grade one in (i) 1991 was 1,508,269, (ii) 1992 was 1,551,097, (iii) in 1993 was 1,554,664, and (iv) in 1994 was 1,588,591 and (b) completed matric in (i) 2002 was 305,774, (ii) 2003 was 322,492, (iii) in 2004 was 330,717 (iv) and 2005 was 347,184.<sup>1</sup>
- (2) The drop-out rate refers to the proportion of learners who leave school without completing a *given grade* in a given school year. Hence, the drop-out rate is grade specific and is not measured across a range of grades. The question presumes that a subtraction of enrolment figures between grades provides a measure of the drop-out rate between grade 1 and grade 12. This assumption is incorrect, as it does not take into account three important factors: (a) learners repeating grades; (b) learners who leave school to attend FET colleges or ABET institutions and (c) learners who delay secondary level schooling for economic reasons. Moreover, when attempting to do a cohort comparison it needs to be born in mind that in the early 1990s there was a high under-age enrolment rate and repetition rate in grade one.

The idea that grade progression can be used to calculate the drop-out rate was expressed by Crain Soudien in a 10-year review of schooling conducted by the Centre for Education Policy Development for the South African Democratic Teachers Union. The findings were reported by David

---

<sup>1</sup> No data for learners in independent schools were available for the TBVC States. 1991: "Education in the RSA 1991 (NATED 02-215, 94/04)"; 1992-1993: *Data News* (EduSource); 1994: "CS Education According to Province for 1994 (233, 95/08)"; 2002-2005: "Senior Certificate Examination" (Department of Education).

MacFarlane in the *Mail and Guardian* in a piece called "The Disappearing Children" (25 November 2005). The Director-General responded to the MacFarlane article with a piece entitled "Who is out of school" (20 January 2006), and commissioned research into the phenomenon of drop outs. The result of the commissioned research is a comprehensive analysis by Dr Luis Crouch, "Disappearing schoolchildren or data misunderstandings - Dropout phenomena in South Africa" (December 2005). It deals fully with the data on enrollment and makes relevant international comparisons.

I attach the two *Mail and Guardian* articles here (the original *Mail and Guardian* article by the Director General rather than the published article that contains unfortunate sub-editing errors), and an abstract of the Crouch article. I also attach the Crouch article as a file, so that Members can get a better idea of how to analyze the enrollment numbers.

However, I am concerned about the number of our learners who do not complete matric through the school process. I say the school process deliberately because many may choose for economic and other reasons to delay their education. But the lion's share of the drop off in enrollment takes place in the post-compulsory school phase. It should be remembered that I do not have the power to compel post-compulsory age learners to continue full time in schooling.

It is worth noting, though, that according to the General Household Survey (2005) 97.9% of children of compulsory school-going age (7 to 15 year olds) attended some form of educational institution in 2005.

- (3) My predecessors and I have taken a number of steps to deal with the issue of learners progressing through the system.

First, when the data began to show that we had a problem of over-enrolment in grade one in the late 1990s, the admission requirement to schools was amended to prescribe an entry age. We will be able to measure the effects of this when the cohort reaches grade 12 in future years. However grade one enrolments have stabilized to about 1,2 million over the last few years as compared to 1,6 million in the late 1990s.

Second, the promotion policy was also amended to allow repetition only once in each phase. This is expected to increase the flow of learners through the system. In addition, we are considering a regime of monitoring the repetition rate in grade 11 so that schools do not artificially select learners into grade 12. This re-emphasizes our position that schools need to encourage learners to complete their schooling.

Third, one of the aims of no-fee schools is to improve learner enrolment.

However, the most sustainable actions are measures to improve the quality of learning and teaching so that the numbers of learners continuing with post-compulsory schooling increases. Clearly these are large systemic issues and the results can only be measured over the long term. However, as I indicated, all indicators are showing an increase in participation, an increase in the number of matriculants passing, and relatively high participation rates in the post compulsory phase.

## **Annexure 1**

### **The disappearing schoolchildren**

David Macfarlane

---

*Mail and Guardian 25 November 2005 11:00*

A new look at Department of Education statistics suggests that from 1995 to 2001 a startling 40% of primary school children dropped out of school.

The findings, by the University of Cape Town's Professor Crain Soudien, are contained in a 10-year review of schooling conducted by the Centre for Education Policy Development (CEPD) for the South African Democratic Teachers Union (Sadtu).

Sadtu commissioned the review to help it identify and develop responses to the education system's "inability to deliver high-quality and equitable education for all South Africa's children". The 200-page document suggests it is in "the key areas of learner access, school funding, teacher morale and, most urgently, quality education that difficulties are being experienced".

Soudien writes that in 1995 1 666 980 pupils enrolled in Grade 1. But by 2001 only 932 151 had made it to Grade 7, "leaving 734 829 learners unaccounted for". "We do not know for sure what happened to them," he told the *Mail & Guardian*, "but with well over 90% of primary school children being passed, it's likely that they left the school system."

Soudien said that because official data was unreliable it was impossible to say whether the school system's retention of pupils had improved or worsened since the years he examined. He had chosen the 1995 to 2001 period because it provided the best available data.

Jonathan Jansen, dean of education at the University of Pretoria, remarked that there were no "fine-tuned studies of drop-out rates. Which there should be -- it's a huge issue."

Speculating on the possible reasons for drop-outs, he said: "On the one hand you insist people go to school, but then don't make it worth their while to be there because the quality is so poor."

Parents also pulled their children out because of costs, while the rise in Aids orphans must be

playing a part, he said.

The review itself points to “external social factors, namely poverty, unemployment, the HIV/Aids pandemic and rurality, which result in a diverse group of learners with diverse learning needs in the system. At present the education system seems out of sync with the needs of these learners.”

Released to Sadtu’s membership for comment this week at the union’s national general council, the review centrally argues that, despite massive and progressive policy strides over the past 10 years, the schooling system continues to deepen socio-economic divisions.

Thulas Nxesi, the union’s general secretary, said there were indications that “the education system, despite significant efforts on the part of the state after 1994, is not achieving its objectives in key areas of delivery that bear on the union’s membership and the public that this membership serves”.

The review argues that “education is the key site upon which social bifurcation and fragmentation is playing itself out”. Poor and predominantly black learners experience discrimination and disadvantage within the education system, and “despite the best intentions in [the government] policy to address the needs of learners from poor and disadvantaged communities ... in fact the policy remains out of reach of these communities”.

Soudien’s chapter also presents new research on achievement rates in numeracy and literacy in the Western Cape demonstrating “the extent to which disparities in quality in the educational system reflect race and class fractures in the broader society”. The best- performing learners were the most well-off. “At every level of the performance spectrum poverty correlates strongly with attainment,” Soudien concludes.

He adds that “redistributive funding may be insufficient or ... conversely there are inefficiencies within poor schools that prevent the take-up of funds”.

## **Annexure 2**

### **“Who is out of school”**

**(Mail and Guardian 20 January 2006)**

#### **Duncan Hindle**

It is widely recognised that we have achieved excellent gross and net enrolment rates over the past eleven years, but there is a growing concern that we rely too heavily on enrolment rates to measure progress at the expense of survival rates.

There is a “toolkit” of indicators that we use to measure participation and completion. Gross enrolment rates measure the capacity of the system, while net enrolment rates measure the enrolment of children of the appropriate age. Survival rates measure progression from grade to grade and the completion of schooling. The proportion of pupils starting grade 1 who reach grade 5 is an indicator for the achievement of the goal of universal primary education in both the Education For All assessment and the Millennium Development Goals.

We are giving survival rates serious attention but we need to be clear about what the indicators of progression and completion cannot tell us. They cannot tell us about learning outcomes and they cannot be used to calculate the number of out-of-school youth.

Unhappily David McFarlane (two weeks’ ago *Mail and Guardian*) used the survival-rate indicator, as explained by Crain Soudien in a SADTU ten-year review, to conclude that there are many more out-of-school children than we are prepared to admit.

Similarly, in October Helen Zille MP (DA) used the survival-rate indicator to calculate out-of-school children in a protracted exchange in the *Cape Times* with Professor Mayatula, Chair of the PC on Education. For example, she wrote:

As for Mayatula’s challenge to substantiate my claims on dropout rates contained in the UNDP’s 2005 report, I refer to page 260 of the chapter on Human Development Indicators. Table 12 on literacy and enrolment shows that in 1990/1991, 75% of children enrolled in Grade 1 reached Grade 5. By 2002/2003 this figure had declined to 65%. This means 35% of children drop out of school before they are even functionally literate or numerate.<sup>2</sup>

The fatal flaw here is this: the survival-rate indicator does not account for late entry into school or repetition of grades. For this reason it is not the internationally accepted method of calculating out-of-school children.

---

<sup>2</sup> Helen Zille, letter, “ANC fails UN exam”, *Cape Times*, October 10, 2005.

The best way to calculate out-of-school children from administrative data is to calculate the age-specific-enrolment ratio. So, for example, in 2001 according to the age-specific ratio we know that 13% of children aged 7 to 18 (1,550,000) were out of school. We know that in 2003 that percentage had dropped to 6% (778,000) and in 2004 risen to 9% (1,180,000).

The difficulty with this method of calculation is that its accuracy depends on the accuracy of Stats SA population estimates. And population estimates are revised between censuses. Recently, mid-term population estimates were revised downwards by Stats SA, and enrolment rates have been revised upwards.

For a better picture we need to know how many repeaters are there. The repeater rate can be calculated from our administrative data. But repeater rates are, like rape statistics, under-reported. Repeating grades is not something to talk about, especially when moving from one school to another. School principals can never know whether a pupil who drops into her school has dropped out of another.

So the under-reporting of repeaters creates a statistical see saw. The lower the number of repeaters, the higher the number of out-of-school children and vice versa.

However, there is an overall downward trend in repeating grades. The proportion of learners who are repeating their current grade has dropped from around 14.5 per cent in 1997 to 9.2 per cent in 2003. The decline in repetition is a major achievement and can be linked to the new curriculum and departmental policy to reduce the high level of repetition. So this is good for the improvement of quality in schooling in terms of funding and smaller class sizes.

Are we forgetting anything? Yes. Gender. Once we start to ask gender questions, as Jennifer Schindler has in a recent article in EduSource,<sup>3</sup> then we find that our repeater data provides clues as to what is happening in our education system. Her analysis is that

---

<sup>3</sup> J.Schindler, "Access to education in South Africa, 2001", Edusource Data News 49, October 2005.

boys are not dropping out of the system more readily than girls, but that they are flowing through the system at a slower rate. In fact, she found that in 2001 one in five of all boys aged 14 to 18 years old was still enrolled in primary school; the equivalent number of girls was one in eight.

She writes: “What seems to have occurred is that boys were repeating grades more frequently than girls. Boys were possibly also dropping out of school in a lower grade and then dropping back into school a year or two later, and doing this at a greater rate than girls. These factors, combined with possible late enrolment in grade 1, mean that by the age of 18 far more boys than girls had failed to complete 12 years of schooling, although they were both still participating in school.”

While repetition data gives us a better view of what is happening in our schools, where do we turn for reliable figures on the number of out-of-school children?

We turn to household surveys. These surveys allow us to examine more closely individual-level differences in education participation. In particular, household surveys allow us to profile the attendance (and not simply the enrolment) of school-age children and those who are not participating in education.

The 2003 household survey reveals that 97 per cent of children aged 7 to 15 (compulsory school age) attend some kind of educational institution - not public schools, but any educational institution.

However, there were 9.1 million children in this age-group, meaning that the 3 per cent “non-attendance” equals more than 320 000 children.

There is a powerful presumption that most children are in some form of educational institution, unless there are impossible physical and financial barriers to attendance. Parents want education for their children; it is a powerful component of the democratic dividend that has come with freedom.

It appears as if the majority of the out-of-school children are children with special needs. This presents us with a huge challenge, because we know that we need to do much more to improve the learning opportunities for disabled and vulnerable children. We are particularly concerned to lighten the load that orphans and other children who are care-givers have to carry.

But we also know that there is a major drop off in attendance after the age of fifteen or grade 9 and that is where the pull of familial poverty becomes a tug that is impossible to withstand.

All in all, the household-survey data is totally incompatible with the notion, as MacFarlane reports, of 40% of the 1995 grade 1 cohort leaving the system by 2001.

### **Annexure 3:**

#### Abstract - Luis Crouch “Disappearing schoolchildren or data misunderstandings? Dropout phenomena in South Africa” (December 2005)

To summarize and anticipate our analysis, and to address the factoids above, we can note the following.

1. Nowhere close to 700 000 children disappear from the system between Grades 1 and 6. On the contrary, if the number of children in grade 6 in, say, 2003, had been the same as the number of children in Grade 1 six years prior, or 1 600 000, then this fact, rather than the fact that there were only 1 000 000 or so children in grade 6 in 2003, would have been the real disaster, not its opposite. This is because there were only about 1 000 000 children in the population of 7-year-olds, and thus an enrollment of 1 600 000 in, say, 1996, represented a huge over-enrollment, and carrying that over-enrollment through to grade 6 would be a terrible inefficiency.
2. Nor is it even close to true that only 65% of children reach grade five. This belief, as well as the one above, is based on a classical and simple misunderstanding regarding education data or, indeed, unfortunately, on data from the apartheid and early post-apartheid period that were particularly poor (though poor in a manner very typical of middle-income countries) and cannot be taken uncritically. Again, the problem arises in looking at an enrolment of 1 600 000 in Grade 1, which contains a lot of repetition due to under-age intake, and assuming that, if there are only 1 000 000 in, say, Grade

2, the year after, then 600 000 must have dropped out. It simply does not work that way. The difference is mostly due to a large number of repeaters in Grade 1, not to dropouts between Grades 1 and 2. In spite of the age-grade norms introduced in the late 1990s, South Africa still suffers from a lot of repetition in the early grades, and certainly did in the mid 1990s (see below). Much of this repetition is not reported as repetition (even with an improved definition in the questionnaires sent to schools) because it is not based on academic failure. Enrolment is artificially increased in Grade 1 for several reasons. Parents in many areas have no access to Early Childhood Development (ECD) opportunities and principals face moral pressure to accommodate these children in an informal ECD which consists of early admission to Grade 1, but with the expectation that the child will sit in Grade 1 two years. Furthermore, the system contains incentives to boost enrolment, and it is easier to enrol a child early in Grade 1, and make him or her repeat the grade (if the child does not repeat, then the enrolment-boosting does not take place, except temporarily, and principals know this), than to entirely make up a non-existent child in later grades. These children were (and are) typically not reported as repeaters. They appear, instead, as new intake, but twice. While much of this sort of practice has been cleaned up from the system since the mid 1990s, some of it persists, and, in any case, much of the argument is based on Grade 1 data from the mid 1990s.

3. The statement that about half of all pupils do not reach Grade 12 is, of all the various assertions, closest to the truth, but the real number appears to be closer to 40% than to 50%. Hence, some 60% do reach 12<sup>th</sup> grade or its equivalent in Further Education and Training (FET). Some error in these assertions is due to the failure to take into account the fact that some youth do not want to go to Grade 12, but go on to FET instead, and FET is often not reported in the same data sources as general education.
4. Whether there are more than a million (or anywhere close) children of school-going age out of school depends entirely on what one means by “school-going age” and on whether one takes a rather generous (for a middle-income country) definition of this age bracket. If one takes the “legal” definition of school-going age, then there are closer to 220 000 children out of school.
5. Next, compared to other middle-income countries, it would be entirely unreasonable to classify South Africa’s dropout problem as “huge,” though obviously there are some dropouts. South Africa does a little better than other middle income countries, and certainly better than its SADC neighbours.
6. And finally, it is somewhat tendentious to claim that South Africa’s education system is merely reproducing social inequalities. The system is not fighting inequalities as hard as it could be (partly because of distracting debates such as this one?), but it is hardly contributing to the reproduction of social inequalities. The inequality in years of achievement, or in learning results, is much lower than the inequality of parental income, for example, and has been decreasing markedly over the past decade.

So it is important to lay these matters to rest, hopefully once and for all, so as to give space to more useful debates.