

Department of Basic Education

Report on Dropout and Learner Retention Strategy

to

Portfolio Committee on Education

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basic education

Department:
Basic Education
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

1. Background on Dropout and Learner Retention

The Portfolio Committee on Education requested the Department Basic Education to prepare a report on dropout rate and retention strategy.

It is important to explain in detail the terms used in this report. Dropout rate by grade (DR) is defined as the proportion of pupils from a cohort enrolled in a given grade at a given school year who are no longer enrolled in the following school year (UNESCO Institute of Statistics , 2009).

The purpose of this indicator is to measure the phenomenon of pupils from a cohort leaving school without completion, and its effect on the internal efficiency of educational systems. In addition, it is one of the key indicators for analysing and projecting pupil flows from grade to grade within the educational cycle.

Dropout rate by grade is calculated by subtracting the sum of promotion rate and repetition rate from 100 in the given school year. For cumulative dropout rate in primary education, it is calculated by subtracting the survival rate from 100 at a given grade (UNESCO Institute of Statistics , 2009).

On the other hand, the report on Learner Retention in the South African Schooling system defined learner retention as "the continued participation of a learner in the formal schooling system until the completion of the compulsory schooling phase. Learner retention is the complement of dropout. It is an indicator of the efficiency or quality of the schooling education system" (Department of Education , 2008).

2. Data issues

The dropout rate is derived by analysing data on enrolment and repeaters by grade for two consecutive years. The good quality data is important in calculating this indicator. To this end, the quality of data collected by the Department makes it difficult to calculate Dropout rate accurately. Therefore data from National Income Dynamics Study (NIDS) has been used to calculate Dropout rate by grade in **2007/2008**. However, the Department has reviewed its survey instruments and it is envisaged that the data quality will improve. This will enable the Department to calculate this indicator accurately.

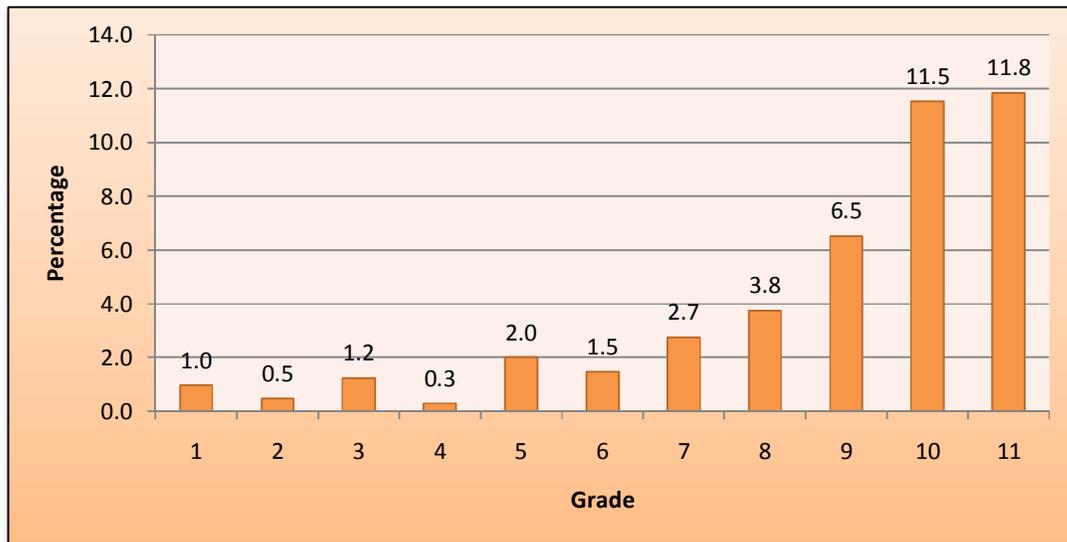
3. Dropout rate by Grade

The overall drop-out rate from the school system (from Grades 1 to 11) was 4%.

It can be seen in **Figure 1** that the drop-out rate before Grade 9 was extremely low. It was around 1% in Grades 1 and 3 and less than 1% in Grades 2 and 4. From Grades 5 to 8 the drop-out rate was minimal, ranging between 2% and 4%. The low drop-out rate in the lower grades was consistent with the high enrolment rates in these grades.

From Grade 9 upwards, however, the drop-out rate increases, reaching almost 12% in both Grades 10 and 11. In total 10% of learners who had been enrolled in Grades 9 to 11 dropped out of school between 2007 and 2008.

Figure 1: Drop-out rate by Grade: 2007/2008



Source: National Income Dynamics Study Survey database, calculated by the DBE

For many years, the Department faced several challenges in determining the dropout rate of children from school owing to the unavailability of reliable data. The recent National Income Dynamics Study (NIDS)¹ has however, proved to be a useful source for this indicator. Since the NIDS data is only available for one year, no trend analysis could be undertaken. Figure 1 shows the drop-out rate from school by grade between 2007 and 2008 (i.e. children who were enrolled in a particular grade in 2007 and were not enrolled in school in 2008).

Research by Strassburg et al (2010) and Fleisch et al (2010) has found that dropping out of schools is not a single event but is usually the result of a combination of inter-related factors that lead up to a child eventually dropping out of school. Fleisch et al (2010:7) noted that poverty alone did not explain why children were not in school and identified other factors (such as disability, family structure, i.e., not living with biological parents or grandparents, orphanhood, being eligible for, but not accessing social welfare and living in isolated communities) which, combined with poverty, make children more vulnerable to dropping out of schools. Strassburg et al (2010: 40-41) found that financial pressures and complex social processes (such as teenage pregnancy and substance abuse) combined with in-school factors (such as lack of stimulation and support) result in youth disengaging from their education and eventually dropping out of school.

¹ NIDS is a national panel study initiated by the Presidency. It is a household survey that was carried out in 2008.

4. Percentage of repeaters

Research studies indicates that repetition is a strong predictor of dropout and that there is a strong correlation between repetition and dropout.

In 2009, on average **9%** of learners enrolled in schools were repeating the grade they were in the previous year². South Africa's level of repetition is high. International comparative information for primary schools for 2007 (UNESCO, 2010:355), shows that South Africa's average level of repetition in primary schools (at 7%), was higher than the average level for developing countries (5%) and for developed countries (less than 1%).

In general, repetition is higher among male learners than female learners.

Table 1 shows that this is apparent in all grades except Grades 11 and 12. Owing to their higher repeater rate, male learners tend to move at a slower rate from one grade to the next, than female learners. Consequently, more males are left behind in primary school, which accounts for the much higher primary school participation rates for males (99% in 2009) as compared to that for females (96% in 2009). Because females move through to secondary school more efficiently than male learners this accounts for the much higher secondary school participation rate for females (88% in 2009) than males (82% in 2009).

Repetition is much greater in higher grades than in the lower grades. This occurs as a result of teachers in the higher grades trying to deal with learners who have failed to master basic skills in primary school but who have nonetheless progressed from grade to grade. The percentage of repeaters in Grades 10 and 11 are particularly high as schools 'gate-keep' in an attempt to improve their national senior certificate examination results which are publicly reported in a way that results of earlier grades are not.

Table 1 shows that in 2009, 8% of school learners enrolled in Grade 12, were repeaters. However the actual level of repetition in Grade 12 is likely to be much higher, since large numbers of learners enrol in FET colleges and Adult Education Centres to have a second chance at passing Grade 12.

Research has shown that in 2007, a third of all children at school had repeated a grade. This applied to 21% of learners in the Foundation Phase (Grades 1 to 3) while 52% had repeated by the time they were in the Further Education and Training (FET) phase (Grades 10 to 12) (Social Surveys Africa and Centre for Applied Legal Studies, 2009:11).

² The General Household Survey included a question on grade repetition for the first time in 2009. Because data for only one year are available, no trends analysis could be done.

Table 1: Percentage of repeaters at schools by grade and gender: 2009

Current grade	% of male repeaters	% of female repeaters	Total % of repeaters
Grade 1	8.2	6.1	7.2
Grade 2	8.3	6.5	7.4
Grade 3	10.4	4.3	7.4
Grade 4	8.7	5.3	7.1
Grade 5	9.0	4.6	6.9
Grade 6	7.7	5.7	6.7
Grade 7	5.7	4.4	5.1
Grade 8	10.4	6.4	8.4
Grade 9	12.3	9.0	10.7
Grade 10	18.7	15.7	17.2
Grade 11	15.9	16.5	16.2
Grade 12	6.9	9.2	8.2
Total	10.2	7.7	9.0

Source: Stats SA (2009)

Table 2: 16 to 18 year olds attending education institution: 2009

Currently attending educational institution	Yes	No	Total	% attending education institutions
16	921216	70253	991469	92.9
17	926669	160171	1086840	85.3
18	746901	289152	1036053	72.1
N=	2594785	519575	3114362	83.3

Source: Statistics South Africa, 2009, DBE own analysis

Table 3: 16 to 18 year olds not attending education institution but have completed Grade 12 and higher: 2009

Currently attending educational institution	No	Completed Grade 12 and higher	% that have completed Grade 12 and higher
Age			
16 years old	70253	2202	3.1
17 years old	160171	17626	11.0
18 years old	289152	19827	6.9
Total	519575	39654	7.6

Source: Statistics South Africa, 2009, DBE own analysis

5. Department's Response to Dropout rate

Goal 13 (**Goal 13: Improve the access of youth to Further Education and Training beyond Grade 9**) of the Action Plan to 2014: Towards the realisation of Schooling 2025 speaks directly to the problem of dropout and retaining learners in the schooling system.

Presently around 39% of South Africa's youths obtain a National Senior Certificate from a school³. At least 7% of youths get to obtain some other qualification at the Further Education and Training level such as a qualification from a public or private FET college. However, most of these youths are youths that also hold a National Senior Certificate. Only around 40% of youths get to obtain some qualification at the FET level, meaning 60% of youths are left with no qualification at all beyond the Grade 9 level. This has serious negative implications for youths when they attempt to find jobs and makes enrolling in post-school studies difficult and often impossible. Moreover, the psychological and social implications of having no qualification to show as evidence for what is usually more than ten years of education is also estimated to be large. Getting more youths to obtain at least one relevant FET qualification, either from a school in the form of the National Senior Certificate, or from an alternative institution such as an FET college, continues to be a major part of the challenge of tackling unemployment and disillusionment amongst youths.

Despite the problems of insufficient successful completion mentioned above, enrolment levels in schools beyond Grade 9 are good by middle income country standards. The percentage of youths who get to enrol in Grades 10, 11 and 12 are 88%, 79% and 69% respectively⁴. The percentage of youths who successfully complete each of these grades is lower, however, for instance 39% for Grade 12. Successful completion of secondary schooling, 39% in South Africa, is not good by international standards. Similar countries achieve upper secondary completion ratios of between 50% and 60%. Within the schooling system, the key challenge appears to be to ensure that more of those who enrol in Grade 12, get to pass Grade 12. With respect to those who do not succeed in passing Grade 12, the question of whether to introduce a General Education Certificate in Grade 9, or widely recognised certificates of successful completion Grades 10 and 11, is a key question. These options are being explored by government as ways of facilitating the transition from school to a post-school institution or the labour market.

³ A simple division of the number of successful Grade 12 matriculants emerging from the public system by the size of one age cohort of youths according to Stats SA reveals a percentage that is considerably lower than 39%. However, it is necessary to adjust population figures to deal with clear discrepancies between enrolment and population figures (this is evident if one takes into account patterns consistently emerging from the General Household Survey) and to include matriculants from the Independent Examinations Board. This provides a statistic of around 40%.

⁴ General Household Survey 2009 dataset.

6. Retention

The report of the Ministerial Committee on Learner Retention indicates that the system has very high retention rates of learners from Grades 1 to 9, and that the problem of retention only begins after Grade 9.

The report of the Ministerial Committee on learner retention found that the survival rate of learners from Grade 1 to Grade 12, though less than 50%, has increased over the years. For instance, more learners born in 1984 survive to Grade 12, as compared to the those born in 1970.

Broadly speaking, retention is the opposite of dropout, so one can safely conclude that there is about 60% retention of learners between grades 9 to 12.

6.1 Initiatives to improve education access and retention

The Department has introduced number of initiatives and incentives for children to come to schools, these include initiatives to reduce repetition, conditions/facilitating for parents to send their children to schools.

- a) **The National School Nutrition Programme:** This programme is aimed at improving access to quality education. Although the programme initially catered for only primary school learners, since 2008, the budget of the programme has been progressively extended to include poor learners in secondary schools as well. In 2009, it provided meals to more than 7 million learners in over 20 000 schools. 6 million primary school learners benefitted from this programme in 2009/10, while close to 1 million secondary school learners did so. The programme was extended to Quintile 2 secondary schools in 2010/11 and the Department intends to increase the number of secondary school learners who benefit from this programme in 2011/12. The NSNP will thus be expanded to include learners in Quintile 3 secondary schools during the 2011/12 financial year.
- b) **No-fee schools:** The no-fee school policy is an initiative aimed at improving education access for poor learners. It stipulates that schools that have a no-fee status are not permitted to charge fees to parents (although it does not exclude voluntary contributions and the hosting of fund-raising events). In 2010, about 70% of learners (over 8 million learners) in 81% of public schools (close to 20 000) benefitted from the no-fee policy.
- c) **The Workbook Project:** The Department has been distributing millions of workbooks to public schools since January this year. These workbooks are intended for learners in Grades 1 to 6, in language and mathematics subjects and are available in all 11 languages. Workbooks are designed to assist teachers who have large classes and who may not necessarily have access to stimulating reading material for learners.

The workbooks will relieve teachers of having to write up lessons and exercises on the chalk-board, or struggling to produce their own worksheets when the school does not have photocopy facilities. In turn, learners may find lessons more interesting and the work they do more stimulating. This could therefore encourage learners to attend school.

- d) **Expansion of Grade R:** The Department has expanded the provision of Grade R in schools dramatically over the past decade. The number of learners enrolled in Grade R in schools increased from about 300 000 in 1999, to over 600 000 in 2009. The Department intends to expand Grade R provisioning even further by improving the quality of Grade R provided by schools. Studies indicate that a child who attends pre-primary programmes is likely to remain longer in the education system.
- e) **Reduction of teacher administrative workload:** The Minister of Basic Education undertook several initiatives in 2010 to reduce the administrative workload of teachers. These include the discontinuance of learner portfolios and the number of projects that learners are expected to undertake, These initiatives intend to facilitate more teaching time and greater attention to learners, thereby increasing opportunity to learn. Studies have indicated that improved opportunities to learn will reduce repetition, which in turn, is likely to reduce dropout since repetition is a strong predictor of dropout. .
- f) **Textbooks:** The Department has encouraged provincial education departments to set aside budgets to ensure that learners are provided a textbook for every subject. Parents whose children are in public schools are therefore not expected to purchase textbooks for their children, and reduces the cost of schooling for parents. It is expected therefore that parents will have little reason for not sending their children to school.
- g) **Education for All Campaign:** One of the legacies of the Soccer World Cup hosted by SA in 2010, was the Education for All Campaign, which highlights the importance of education for children. A number of NGOø and CBOø, including Radio FM, have organised media campaigns that spell out the advantages of education. Such campaigns encourage parents to enroll their children in schools and other education programmes.
- h) Furthermore, the Department has established a special ministerial project which identified 585 schools with high levels of crime and violence and undertook special interventions to reduce school violence and drug taking (minimum package of infrastructure, (fences, lighting, metal detectors etc), sponsorships of sports and cultural programmes and development of partnerships with relevant government departments and Business Against Crime.
- i) *Full Service Schools* were established, that would ensure that learners with disabilities have access to education

Conclusion

Indicators are interrelated, therefore should be interpreted in relation to others. Dropout rate needs to be read with array of other indicators such as repetition rate, completion rate and promotion rate.