

Research on Factors Contributing to Dropout among Grades 10 and 11 in Gauteng

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ACRONYMS

ABET	Adult Basic Education and Training
ANA	Annual National Assessments
CPI	Cumulative Promotion Index
CREATE	Consortium for Research on Education, Access, Transitions and Equity
DBE	Department of Basic Education
DHET	Department of Higher Education and Training
DSD	Department of Social Development
EMIS	Education Management Information System
ESSP	Extra-School Support Team
FET	Further Education and Training
GDE	Gauteng Department of Education
GET	General Education and Training
HoD	Head of Department
IDSO	Institutional Development & Support Official
LURITS	Learner Unit Record Information and Tracking System
NQF	The National Qualifications Framework
NSC	National Senior Certificate
OCR	Optical Character Recognition
PP	Promotion Power
SASA	South African Schools Act
SAT	School Assessment Team
SBST	School-Based Support Team
SPSS	Statistical Package for Social Sciences
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

CANDIDATE	A learner who has completed the National Senior Certificate (NSC) programme and who has registered for the NSC final examinations.
CERTIFICATION	The issuing of the National Senior Certificate when the minimum promotion requirements have been met.
CONDONED PASS	When a learner has not passed the grade but has been put through to the next grade due to the relaxation of promotion requirements.
CUMULATIVE PROMOTION INDEX (CPI)	Cumulative Promotion Index (CPI) is a way of measuring a school's ability to promote learners to the following grade. CPI looks at school as a series of events rather than a single event; starting with grade 8 – 9, and finishing with passing matric. The ratio of the number of learners in one grade to the number of learners in the next grade is calculated for a particular cohort, across the entire school career. These ratios are then multiplied with one another to give the index.
DROPOUT	Any learner leaving the public ordinary school system prior to completing grade 12, irrespective of whether this occurs during or at the end of the academic year.
EXTRINSIC FACTORS	External pressures, including school and family circumstances, which cause learners to grow discouraged and give up on school.
GRADE REPETITION	The process of having a learner repeat a grade, usually one previously failed.
INCOME SHOCKS	Events that reduce group or individual well-being, such as illness, unemployment or natural disasters, and which may themselves cause or compound poverty.
INTRINSIC FACTORS	Individual disposition or personal choices that cause a learner to drop out of school.
LEARNER RETENTION	The continued participation of a learner in the formal schooling system until the completion of the compulsory schooling phase.
NATIONAL SENIOR CERTIFICATE	A qualification at level 4 on the national Qualifications framework (NQF) which is awarded to grade 12 candidates who comply with the National Policy Requirements.
PROGRESSION	The advancement of a learner from one grade to the next in spite of not having complied with all promotion requirements. Progression can be used to prevent a learner from being retained in a phase for a period exceeding four years as stipulated in the <i>Admission Policy for Ordinary Public Schools</i> provided that the underperformance of the learner in the previous grade is addressed in the grade to which the learner has been promoted.
PROMOTION	The movement of a learner from one grade to the next when that learner meets the minimum required level of achievement per subject in a particular grade.
PROMOTION POWER	Promotion Power (PP) is a means of measuring a school's ability to progress its learners to subsequent grades.
PUSHOUT	Intentional or unintentional actions of educators which have the effect of excluding children with limited academic potential from writing grade 12 examinations.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Khulisa Management Services and their BEE partner, Basic Blue Management Consultants, hereinafter referred to as the Consortium, were contracted by the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE) to conduct research into the factors contributing to dropout among grades 10 and 11 learners in public ordinary schools.

This dipstick study of 30 secondary schools in Gauteng provided insight into what schools with high learner attrition between grades 10 and 12 are experiencing. The 30 schools were selected based on their poor graduation rate of learners. Because the selection was purposeful, the findings in this report are not generalisable. The value of the study lies in the exploration and documentation of certain beliefs and practices that are contributing to the dropout phenomenon so that appropriate responses can be formulated and tested.

The figure below depicts the consolidated enrolment pyramid of all 30 schools surveyed. It shows enrolment levels in Grades 8, 10 and 12. Schools do not record where these learners go. The peak in enrolment in Grade 10, is caused by excessive repetition and has been referred to by respondents as “The Crisis in Grade 10.” Respondents attributed this bottleneck to the policy of condoned passing in the GET phases and the change in the assessment policy in the FET phase. The consequence of high repetition in Grade 10 leads to over-aged learners. This crisis is the main contributor to learners feeling forced out of school against their will. Being too old also contributed to learners giving up on school of their own accord. (rephrase - Another factor influencing learners to give up on school of their own accord, is the age factor, being too old?)

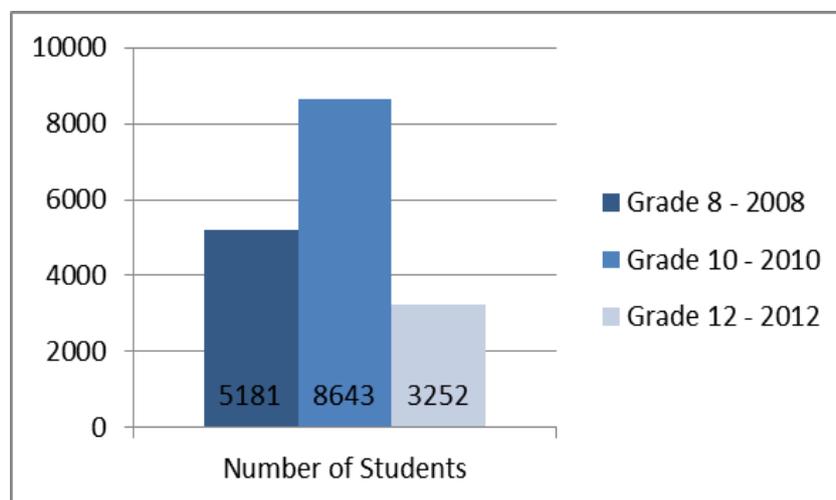


Figure 1: Consolidated enrolment pyramid from 30 studied Gauteng Schools

Within 21 of the surveyed schools for which three years of data was available, each year there were fewer learners who wrote matric while the pass rate increased. This suggests that the decrease in enrolment is a result of pushout in order to improve matric pass rates. 58% fewer learners wrote in 2011 than in 2009.

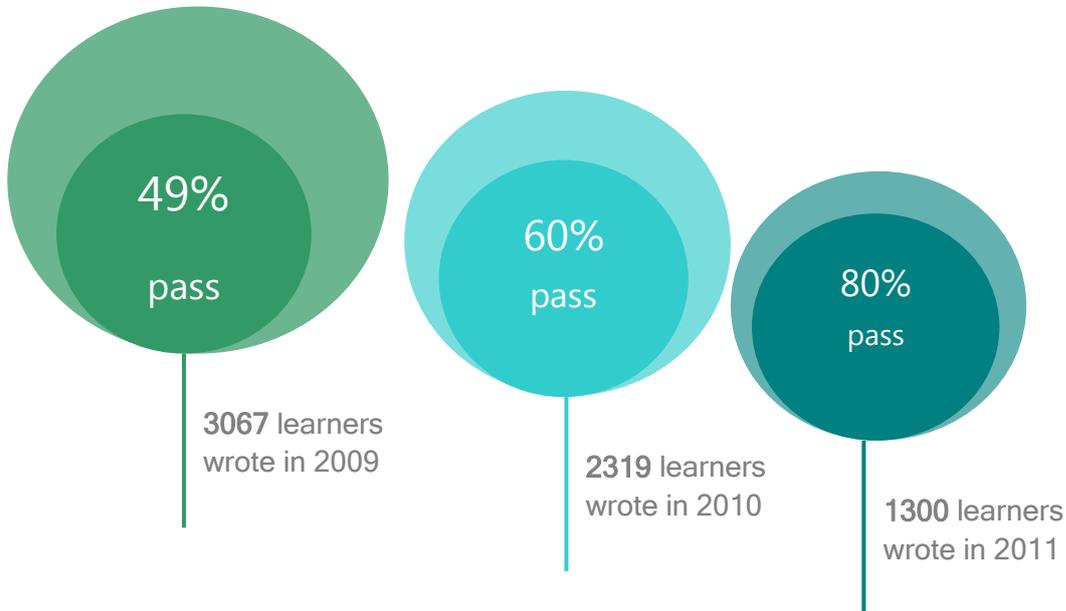


Figure 2: Decreased class size vs. increased pass rate

Three key findings from this study are:

- 1) There is a repetition crisis in Grade 10**
 - 2) Grade repetition is a major predictor of dropout**
 - 3) Many learners feel “Pushout.” i.e. pressure to leave school against their will**
-

From the data collected from educators, principals, learners and dropouts¹, the factors contributing to dropout were assigned to one of three categories, i.e. Pushout, Extrinsic and Intrinsic Factors. The findings, according to category, are summarised in the following table:

Drop out Factors	International Literature	South African Literature	Our Findings
Pushout Factors – school related factors which are experienced by learners as unwanted pressure to leave school as they will likely compromise the schools’ Grade 12 examination results	Pushout is not a phenomenon discussed in the international literature reviewed	Some allusions to Pushout, but not well documented	We found that Pushout was the most common reason provided by dropouts in answer to what caused them to drop out (more than half)
Extrinsic Factors - learners who are vulnerable or who have become discouraged as a result of external pressures at home or in the community	Extensive literature that focuses on institutional factors - such as social and family circumstances	Most discussed shortcomings in the South African school system and the effects of poverty	We found that Extrinsic Factors were the second most common reason provided by dropouts for what caused them to drop out (more than a quarter)
Intrinsic Factors - learners who are at risk of dropping out due to individual disposition, behaviours and personal choices	Extensive literature highlighting attitudes and problem behaviours	Cursory investigation into attitudes and behaviours that cause a learner to choose to dropout	We found that Intrinsic Factors were the least common reasons provided by dropouts in answer to what caused them to drop out (less than a quarter)

Table 1: Summary of findings

Contrary to perceptions of educators and peers, extrinsic and intrinsic reasons for dropout constituted the smallest proportion of learners who actually dropped out. School-related factors – experienced as “Pushout” by learners and dropouts – were most often cited as the main reason for dropping out. Many dropouts and prospective dropouts reported that educators pressure them to leave school. Learners who were too old for their grade were most likely to report being told to go to an ABET Centre or FET College, without information on the exact services and potential benefits of these opportunities or formal referral procedures being followed.

FET Colleges and ABET Centres are viewed by educators as a catch-all for all kinds of learners who are unlikely to complete grade 12. Currently there is a stigma attached to FET and ABET alternatives on the part of learners and parents who have limited awareness of their purpose. High tuition fees and geographical distance are reportedly further barriers.

¹ Fieldwork was conducted in 30 schools. 73 interviews with principals and educators were conducted. A total of 15,439 self-administered questionnaires were retrieved from learners in grades 10-12 at all the 30 schools. 153 direct telephonic interviews were conducted with learners who were considered by their peers to have dropped out.

Allegations surfaced that schools were intentionally failing learners (especially in grade 10, but also in grade 11) to reduce the likelihood of their reaching and failing matric. Learners reported that the schools do this in order not to jeopardise the schools' matric pass rate which is currently the primary measure of school performance and is linked to certain incentives. There is no procedure in place to assess the veracity of these allegations.

Learner perceptions of pushout as the leading cause of dropout versus educator perceptions of extrinsic and intrinsic factors as the leading causes of dropout, provides a valuable opportunity for intervention. System improvements can be effected at a policy level, district level and at a school level. Each of these levels has a key role to play in addressing the problem of learner drop out.

Overall, these schools are responding to several pressures:

1. To improve senior certificate pass rates;
2. To maximise learner numbers to maintain teachers and maximise learner subsidies, and
3. To cope with ill-discipline and unruly learners.

As a result, schools maximise repetition, but discourage learners from completing school. One way of achieving this is for policy makers to measure Grade 8, 10 and 12 enrolment rates.

A key complementary factor is the prevalent culture of disrespect in many of these schools. Many teachers, learners, and managers reported elements that indicated poor respect, hostility and anger.

Recommendations to address dropout were developed jointly by Khulisa, Basic Blue and the GDE Project Management Team after reviewing the research findings and the recommendations offered by schools. Final recommendations are summarised by order of importance in the table on the following page.

SUMMARY OF HIGH LEVEL RECOMMENDATIONS

HIGHEST PRIORITY

- Use **Grade 8-10-12 enrolment ratios** as measure of school performance along with matric pass rates

HIGH PRIORITY

- Create an **appeals mechanism** for learners and parents to challenge perceived abuses
- Use **diagnostic assessments** to address the problem of learners who are in an inappropriate grade for their academic level
- Offer **remedial training** for learners to improve on specific learning areas rather than requiring them to repeat a grade
- **Negotiate with transport** service providers to enable access to additional learning opportunities
- Add '**dropout awareness**' to MEC's parent booklet
- Make provision for the important function of **career guidance** among educators
- Design uniform and verifiable **Transfer Cards** to reduce forging
- Provide **referral guidelines for ABET and FET**
- Identify and follow up on schools where **policy compliance is poor**
- Compare dropout study dataset with **Whole School Evaluation and SIP** datasets
- **Define "Dropout"** more clearly in the Learner Attendance Policy
- Develop a clear **Policy Statement on "Pushout"**

MEDIUM PRIORITY

- **Demystify the assessment policy** for learners, parents and educators who have an inadequate understanding
- Provide more frequent motivational speakers and events by means of **Dropout 'Knowledge Campaigns'** and measure whether or not more learners stay in school as a result
- **Confirm guardianship** in cases where learners are not staying with biological parents
- Make **roles explicit** for educators responsible for dropout and offer **certified training** to identify and assist learners at risk of dropping out
- Create **Dropout Register**
- Provide clear guidance on how schools should deal with **reregistration**
- **Stream Grade 10** learners who are at different ages and ability levels

LOWER PRIORITY

- Clarify the policy on **teen parents**
- Use **SMS communication** system to notify parents of learners' absenteeism
- Standardise **Learner Profiles**
- Require **Period Attendance Registers**
- **Address negative perceptions of FET and ABET**
- Assist schools to communicate **FET bursary** opportunities to suitable learners
- Assess **Extra School Support Programme's (ESSP)** effectiveness in addressing dropout

FOR FURTHER INVESTIGATION

- Explore the **legal definition of "Parents"** according to SA Schools Act and allow for a wider definition of parents at school
- Link with **other departmental databases for more efficient learner tracking** (e.g. **DSD Child Support Grants, HA, DoH**)
- Use **LURITS** as existing tracking system in tracking dropouts
- Reconsider the practice of issuing **condoned passes**
- Make **NQF** a reality for FET

Table 2: Summary of high level recommendations

Introduction

The Consortium was contracted by the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE) to conduct research into the factors contributing to dropout among grades 10 and 11 learners in public ordinary schools.

We asked:

- What do learners believe led to their classmates who dropped out?
- Who is feeling at risk of dropping out of school and why?
- Who actually drops out and why? When do they drop out and where do the learners go to after they have dropped out?
- What do educators and school managers attribute to dropping out and what do they try to do to mitigate this?

To answer these questions, a total of 15,652 self-administered questionnaires were issued to learners in grades 10-12; 138 dropouts from those schools were interviewed, and 73 interviews were conducted with school staff members (including teachers, principals, deputy-principals, and various others) at each of the 30 schools.

TOTAL RESPONDENTS				
Learners		Total Learners	School Interviews	Dropout Interviews
M	F			
7658	7994	15652	73	138

Table 3: Total number of respondents

The reasons offered for dropout were categorised under “Pushout”, “Extrinsic” or “Intrinsic” factors, i.e.:

- 1) *Pushout Factors* – school-related factors that are experienced by learners as exclusion from school. These included both unintentional and deliberate endeavours by educators or school management to limit the number of learners who write grade 12 examinations to the ones who are most likely to pass;
- 2) *Extrinsic Factors* – external factors, such as home or community circumstances and pressures that cause learners to become vulnerable to dropping out or discouraged at school;
- 3) *Intrinsic Factors* – factors related to individual disposition, behaviour or personal choices of learners which leads to dropping out.

For the purposes of the study, learner dropout is regarded as any learner leaving the public ordinary school system prior to completing grade 12, irrespective of whether this occurs during or at the end of the academic year

Methodology Summary

Thirty secondary schools were purposefully selected for participation in the study. The schools were chosen because their enrolment pyramids showed the biggest discrepancy between Grade 8, Grade 10 and Grade 12 enrolment. In the worst case, Grade 8 enrolment is 416, Grade 10 declines to 337 and only 129 entered Grade 12, clearly demonstrating high levels of learner attrition.

The bar chart below shows grades 8, 10 and 12 enrolment figures in the 30 sampled schools.

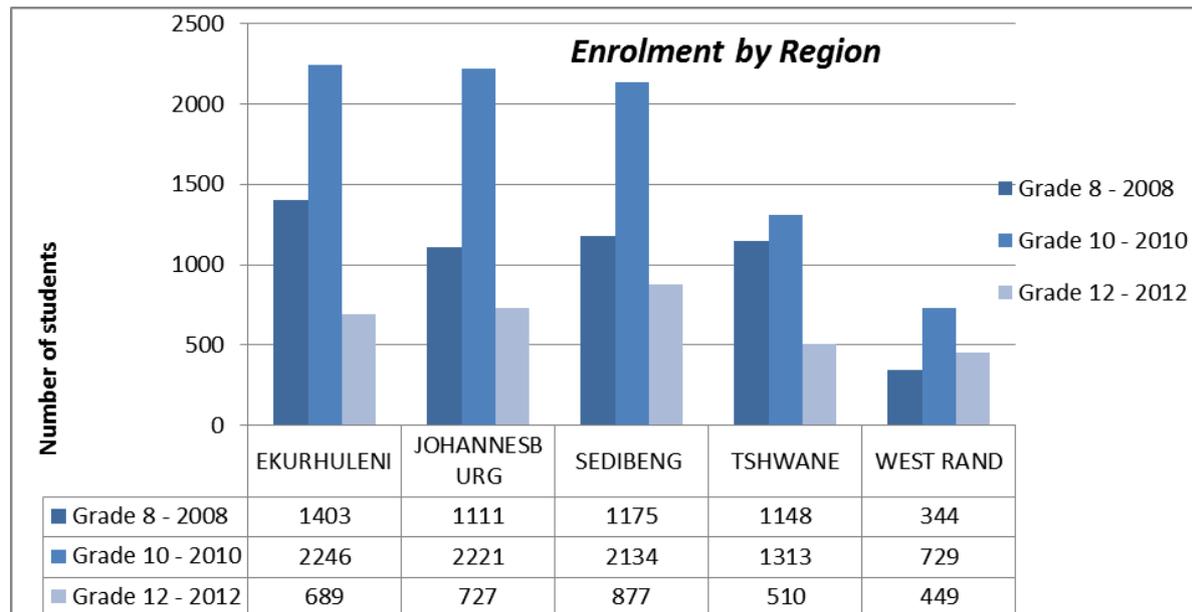


Figure 3: Consolidated enrolment pyramid from 5 Gauteng regions

For more detailed description of the Methodology used, see Appendix A. The Enrolment Pyramids by school are in Appendix B.

Limitations

The schools were **purposefully** selected and provide a very small sample. Findings are not generalisable across the province. Qualitative interview data from dropouts in West Rand region is from only one school as all the numbers provided for learners at Thuto Pele Secondary proved unreachable.

No headcounts could be taken at the schools as instruments were administered by educators in classrooms in an effort not to disrupt the normal school day. The total number of questionnaires has been used as a proxy for learner numbers.

Also, it was evident from analysis of the questionnaires returned by learners that some may not have distinguished between two of the questions which intended to ascertain reasons for potentially leaving the school of their own accord and leaving against their will.

This report starts with a review of international and South African literature on what other research studies have identified as factors contributing to school dropout. In the following section, “Setting the Scene,” the context of the 30 schools in the sample is outlined as well as a case study of one school. Findings from the research study are then presented. The reports end with recommendations, policy implications and conclusions.

The Phenomenon of School Dropout: Review of International and South African Literature

Dropping out of school is not a sudden event. Rather, it is an extended process that results from a combination of institutional circumstances, (i.e. school, family and community), and attitudinal factors (i.e. personal choices and disposition of the individual learner).²

The key pieces of international and South African research selected for review in this section highlight the factors that have been shown by other studies to cause learners to drop out of school as well as presenting a best practice for a dropout intervention.

INTERNATIONAL LITERATURE

“Dropping Out from School: A Cross-Country Review of Literature”. Consortium for Research on Education, Access, Transitions and Equity (CREATE). November 2008.

CREATE’s 2008 cross-country literature review of school dropout relied on academic and development agency literature and determined that the phenomenon is “a major problem in developing countries [which is] obscured within statistical data and by the emphasis on initial access.”³

The focus of the study is on factors that contribute to dropout before completion of basic education, which generally takes children up to the age of 15. The study looks at “push/pull factors” in schools, communities and households. The countries primarily under investigation in the study are in South Asia and Sub Saharan Africa. The factors identified in this research are all considered extrinsic for the purpose of this report. The focus is on external pressures encountered by children as opposed to personal choices.

Research questions explored in this literature review are:

- Why do children drop out before completing basic education?
- What processes lead to dropping out?
- What factors mitigate against dropping out?
- What are the gaps in research?⁴

² In Khulisa’s study, ‘*Institutional Factors*’ for the most part, have been categorised as ‘*Extrinsic Factors*’. ‘*Attitudinal Factors*’ apply best to our category of ‘*Intrinsic Factors*’. It is acknowledged that to some extent the two categories present a false dichotomy, as many of the variables cannot be definitively separated; each affecting the other.

³ Hunt (2008) 1.

⁴ Ibid (2008) 4.

The factors identified are as follows:

1) Household income and fluctuating financial circumstances

An important factor, this covers both upfront costs (i.e. school fees) and hidden costs (i.e. travel, uniforms, equipment). The review cites studies that highlight the link between poverty and dropping out. Poverty is “the most common primary and contributory reason for students to be out of school.”⁵ As is the case in South Africa, some countries have adopted no fee policies, which “while this may ease problems of drop out resulting from schooling costs, indirect costs and quality issues may increase.”⁶

Research shows that in times of “income shocks”, households may withdraw children from school in order to work, save costs, or free up other members of the household for work.⁷

2) Child labour

In most cases, child labour is household-related (in the case of girls), and agricultural (in the case of boys). This type of work does not necessarily prevent access to education, although it can affect regular attendance, which is “seen as a precursor to dropping out.”⁸ In some cases, working actually allows children to gain access to school by providing extra money or making it possible for siblings to access education.⁹ In the case of South Africa, unemployment may be a deterrent to dropping out. There is evidence that the high unemployment rate may encourage children to stay in school longer.¹⁰

3) Migration

Migration of learners is linked to both increased and decreased educational opportunities.¹¹ “In South Africa, the migration process is significant as students try to gain access to better quality schooling. These often overcrowded schools reject applicants, leading to temporary gaps in education as potential students apply elsewhere.”¹²

4) Home circumstances

Research suggests that the number of people and who make up the household, influences retention, but differs when it comes to the effect of household size on dropout, as well as the effect of fostering. Bereavement and orphanhood makes children more vulnerable to dropping out.¹³

⁵ Ibid (2008) 7.

⁶ Hunt (2008) 9.

⁷ Ibid (2008) 11.

⁸ Ibid (2008) 11.

⁹ Ibid (2008) 12.

¹⁰ Ibid (2008) 13.

¹¹ Ibid (2008) 15.

¹² Ibid (2008) 16.

¹³ Ibid (2008) 17-19.

Education levels of household members is “particularly influential in determining whether and for how long children access schooling.” Research shows that the value placed on education by household members is linked to how children access schooling, “but there is less research on how this may attribute to dropping out.”¹⁴

Decision-making regarding dropping out appears to be under-researched.¹⁵

5) Health

Child health, health of relatives, pregnancy and disability / special needs affect factors associated with dropping out (i.e. late enrolment, low attendance and performance). (2008:24-25). The frequency of children dropping out based on the health of their relatives is context specific. In South Africa, children were not removed from school to look after dying mothers. (2008:26). Pregnancy is a significant cause of dropout for teenage girls (2008:26). Although educational exclusion based on disability is vast, the link between disability and dropout is difficult to research due to definitions which are not heterogeneous and the possibility that lack of access for children with disabilities means there are fewer instances of dropout and thus less available research. (2008:28)

6) Socio-political contexts

Socio-political contexts relating to gender, the rural/urban divide, socially disadvantaged groups, conflict and emergency situations, and age, marriage, and notions of adulthood that are discussed in relation to dropouts, are specific to different country contexts. In South Africa, girls are more likely to finish Grade 12 and boys tend to take longer to get through the school system. The preconceptions in relation to the rural/urban divide in access to education is not always true (typically it is believed that rural schools experience higher dropout rates, but in some instances an urban setting may increase the dropout rate). Often there are “interlocking reasons” for lower access and retention for children in socially disadvantaged groups (i.e. ethnic, religious and ethno-linguistic groups.)¹⁶

7) Supply of schools and the school’s role in dropping out

There is evidence that a limited supply of schools influences dropout, especially in the cases where there are fewer secondary schools than primary schools, which can make the transition problematic.

“Factors within schools such as institutional configurations, processes and practices and schooling relations all influence types and experiences of access,” although the definition of ‘quality’ is not clear, and few studies have explored the link between school quality and dropout. School resources and facilities can be linked to dropout, though indirectly.

The quality of teaching and learning is linked to educational outcomes and learners’ experience of schooling, which can in turn be linked to dropout. “Beatings and intimidation affect children’s

¹⁴ Ibid (2008)21-22.

¹⁵ Ibid (2008)23.

¹⁶ Hunt (2008) 30- 36.

motivation to attend school.” Few studies make the direct link between safety and dropping out, although school environment (specifically learner on learner violence / bullying or corporal punishment) has a potential link which has not been fully explored.¹⁷

8) Precursors to dropping out

The study emphasises that dropping out is a result of a series of events or processes rather than one single event. Factors that – in combination – may lead to dropout include repetition and promotion, low achievement, late enrolment (at the outset of the child’s education) and absenteeism.¹⁸

Recommendations for interventions offered in this paper that are especially relevant to the South African schools system and which bear further investigation include: automatic promotion and repetition, language of instruction, monitoring, adult education programmes, and alternative forms of education.¹⁹

“Why Students Drop Out of School: A Review of 25 Years of Research.” California Dropout Research Project. University of California Santa Barbara & Gevitz Graduate School of Education, USA. October, 2008.

This study is based on a review of 25 years of research into the dropout phenomenon throughout the United States. The review identifies two types of factors that can be used to predict whether students will drop out or complete high school. These are “factors associated with *individual characteristics* of students, and factors associated with the *institutional characteristics* of their families, schools and communities.”²⁰

Individual Predictors:²¹

- *Educational performance*: test scores and grades in high school; academic achievement in elementary and middle school; student mobility during middle and high school; retention in elementary, middle and high school.
- *Behaviours*: student engagement in academic work and the social aspects of school; absenteeism; misbehaviour in high school and delinquent behaviour outside of high school; drug or alcohol use during high school; teenage parenting and childbearing; and having friends who engage in criminal behaviour or friends who have also dropped out. Students who work more than 20 hours a week are much more likely to drop out.
- *Attitudes*: educational expectations are a major indicator, with the result that there are lower dropout rates amongst students who expect to go further in school.²²
- *Background*: the characteristics of a student’s background are linked to dropout rates. These include their demographics and past experiences. Dropout rates are higher for males than for females. Participation in preschool increases school readiness and early school

¹⁷ Ibid (2008) 37-42.

¹⁸ Ibid (2008) 44-46.

¹⁹ Ibid (2008) 47-50.

²⁰ Rumberger and Ah Lim (2008) 1.

²¹ Ibid (2008) 1.

²² Ibid (2008) 1-2.

success and also affects high school completion. The incidence of teen parenting and participation in crime are also indicators.

Institutional Predictors:²³

- *Families*: students living with both parents have lower dropout rates than those living within alternative family arrangements. The dropout rate increases with changes in family structure and other stressful events, such as moving, illness, death, adults entering and leaving households, and marital disruptions. Students from homes with more family resources are more likely to stay in school. Several parenting practices have been shown to decrease the dropout rate, including having higher educational aspirations for their children, monitoring their children's school progress, and communicating with the school. Students are more likely to drop out if one of their siblings has already done so.
- *Schools*: the most relevant characteristics of schools in this respect are the composition of the student body; school resources; structural features; and policies and practices.²⁴ No research shows that school size has a consistent effect on the rate of dropout. There is strong evidence that smaller class size in grades K-3 improve the rate of high school completion. Students are more likely to stay in schools with a stronger academic climate, and more likely to drop out if the disciplinary climate is weak. Significantly for the South African context, "requiring students to attend school beyond age 16 leads to lower dropout and higher completion rates."
- *Communities*: While it is not necessarily the case that living in a neighbourhood with a high rate of poverty results in a higher dropout rate, it is found that living in an affluent neighbourhood is beneficial in terms of school success.

The study concludes that a student's decision to drop out cannot be attributed to any single factor. The decision to drop out is not only linked to the school environment, as the chances of staying in school are also influenced by behaviours outside of school. Dropping out is a process rather than an event, and for many students, that process starts in early elementary school. Students' likelihood of dropping out are linked to "access to not only fiscal and material resources, but also social resources in the form of supportive relationships in families, schools and communities."²⁵

"Who will drop out from school? Key predictors from the literature." Children's Institute, New York, USA. January, 2004.

This analysis is based on a review of longitudinal studies, and, in recognition that dropping out is best characterised as an "evolving process rather than an event," a number of predictors were identified that were linked to later school dropout. These range from the time before a child enters school to the high school experience. The quality of care giving before schooling commences was found to be a useful predictor. The other three stages at which predictors were found to be most telling were at the first grade, at elementary school, and at middle / high school. At each of these three schooling stages, problem behaviours, school performance and grade retention were predictors. At elementary school and middle / high school level, parent involvement, gender, SES,

²³ Ibid (2008) 2.-3

²⁴ Ibid (2008) 2.

²⁵ Rumberger and Ah Lim (2008) 3.

stressful life events, and mobility were identified as predictors. Unique to the high school level were the additional predictors of absenteeism, disciplinary problems, and 'self-report' by students regarding how likely they felt they were to graduate.²⁶

Three major themes emerged from the study:²⁷

1. "Early predictors matter"

The study cited eight variables that could be used most effectively to predict school dropout, and the various grade / age levels at which they most effectively served as predictors:

- Parent involvement (Grade 6)
- Problem behaviours (Grade 1)
- Peer competence (16 years)
- Problem behaviours (after Grade 1)
- Gender (not specified)
- Quality of care received (6 – 42 months)
- Academic achievement (Grade 1)
- Academic achievement (16 years)

Early predictors, ranging as far back as the quality of care giving prior to schooling, were not displaced by later attitudes and behaviours when it came to predicting dropout.²⁸

2. "Grade retention is a major predictor"

Grade retention was a well-established risk factor in the literature reviewed by the study. Even with control factors taken into consideration, repeating a grade was found to be associated with a seven-fold increase in the risk of dropout.²⁹ Indeed, "[a]lmost all children who had multiple grade retention dropped out."³⁰

3. "Multiple risk factors are more predictive than any individual factor"

The study recommended that the prevention of school dropout should start early, and that there should be a strategy for prevention at every stage of development. It was possible to identify students at risk of dropping out based on multiple early risk factors.³¹

"Grade Retention and School Dropout: Policy Debate and Research Questions." Phi Delta Kappa Center for Evaluation, Development, and Research. December 1995.

This study examines the link between grade retention and school dropout, and finds that "repeating a grade provides few remedial benefits and may, in the long run, place students at a higher risk of dropping out of school."³² At the time the study was conducted, two developments were

²⁶ Montes & Lehmann (2004) 1.

²⁷ Ibid (2004) 5.

²⁸ Montes & Lehmann (2004) 5.

²⁹ Ibid (2004) 5.

³⁰ Ibid (2004) 1.

³¹ Ibid (2004) 1.

³² Roderick (1995) 3.

identified as contributing to an increased retention rate. Firstly, many school systems had developed strict policies, whereby promotion was tied to “scores on curriculum-referenced or basic-skills tests.”³³ Secondly, there had been a steady increase in the number of kindergarten and preschool enrolments, which brought with them an increase in the academic demands of children at that early level of schooling.³⁴

The study identifies aspects of the retention experience that put students at risk of dropping out. This includes the fact that “grade retention is perhaps the strongest message that a teacher and a school can send to a student that she or he is not... as capable as other children, a failure that is permanent and cannot be remediated by extra effort.”³⁵ Retention has long-term effects on self-esteem that may supersede even short-term benefits. Regardless of when it occurs, grade retention may increase the chances of dropout, since “it makes a student overage for grade during adolescence, and, for those who are already having difficulty in school, it may increase the likelihood that they will feel frustrated and become disengaged.”³⁶

Qualitative studies found that young children perceive retention as both punitive and a stigmatising. In the case of adolescents, retention increases levels of frustration at failing to excel and disengagement from school.³⁷

In the school systems under review, the “increasing emphasis on using test scores to hold schools and teachers accountable for performance creates disincentives for teachers to allow heterogeneity in the classroom and students to develop at their own pace, even as early as first grade.”³⁸

“Communities In Schools National Evaluation: Five Year Executive Summary.” ICF International, Fairfax, VA, October 2012.

This methodologically robust evaluation of a dropout prevention strategy is an example of an international ‘best practice’.

Communities In Schools (CIS) is a national organisation in the United States. It was established in 1977 and now has 200 affiliates nationwide. CIS serves nearly 1.3 million students in 3 400 schools each year. The mission of CIS is to “surround students with a community of support, empowering them to say in school and achieve in life.” The CIS approach is to place a dedicated staff member inside partner schools to identify students at risk of dropping out. This co-ordination post enables community partners and volunteers to address both the academic and human service needs of students.

Findings from the National Evaluation of CIS schools demonstrated positive effects on both dropout and graduation relative to their non-CIS comparison schools.³⁹

The key findings are summarised below:

³³ Ibid (1995) 4.

³⁴ Ibid (1995) 4.

³⁵ Ibid (1995) 4.

³⁶ Ibid (1995) 4.

³⁷ Ibid (1995) 4.

³⁸ Roderick (1995) 7.

³⁹ Communities In Schools National Evaluation, ICF International (2012) 1.

1. Providing high-risk students with case-managed services contributes not only increased **retention** but improved **progression** as well; the same students also performed better academically than control students.

2. Improvement in **attendance** was strongest for CIS case-managed students in 9th grade although no differences were found between treatment and control groups for 6th grade.

3. **Behavioural problems / discipline** were measured by a) out-of-school suspensions, and b) disciplinary referrals. “Disciplinary referrals in high school increased relative to the comparison group, though it was unclear whether Communities In Schools brought more scrutiny to some students’ behaviour, causing more disciplinary referrals, or whether these findings reflect a truly negative impact of the CIS program.”⁴⁰

Findings on *How* and *Why* Communities In Schools work, included the following:

- Adherence to the CIS model of integrated student services
- Intentionality of service provision
- Continuity and sustainability of service provision
- Strong business practices, CIS leadership, and school support for communities in schools

It was also found that in cases of high implementation fidelity, the Communities In Schools model was effective regardless of grade level, geography and student demographics.

⁴⁰ Ibid (2012) 6.

SOUTH AFRICAN LITERATURE

“Progress Report to the Minister of Education by Ministerial Committee on Learner Retention in the South African Schooling System.” 2007.

The factors identified as contributing to learner dropout in the Progress Report do not differ significantly from the rest of the literature under review. However, the report does bring to attention the fact that the term ‘dropout’ is not well-defined in research literature, particularly in the context of the post-compulsory phase of South African education. This raises a number of questions, including in which cases can dropout be attributed to a failure of the education system and in which cases can it not? Can the term ‘dropout’ be used when there is no legal obligation to keep learners in school through to the end of Matric (Grade 12), even though the premise of the report was that “the education system should strive towards retaining learners in schools for as long as possible”?⁴¹

The report discusses various definitions of ‘dropout’ that are in use and settled on the measure provided by UNESCO in lieu of a definition, i.e. dropout rate per grade is “the percentage of pupils who drop out from a given grade in a given school year. It is the difference between 100% and the sum of the promotion and repetition rates.” The motivation provided for adopting the UNESCO definition was to “ensure that South Africa’s reporting schedules on the Millennium Development Goals are within the international guidelines set by UNESCO.”⁴²

The research process for this report included a call for public submissions on learner retention via newspapers. Out of a total of 14 responses, the following general themes, with many more specific subthemes, emerged:

- Socio-emotional issues in context
- Learner academic difficulties
- Socio-economic issues in society
- Mobility and access to schools
- Resources and facilities
- Teachers and teaching
- Within-school management
- Education policy and implementation
- General⁴³

Although these submissions cannot be considered to be anything more than anecdotal, it might be a valuable exercise to compare the findings from the dropout study for GDE with what emerged through the public submission process to see if public perceptions of the dropout study are backed up by more rigorous research.

⁴¹ Progress Report (2007) ix.

⁴² Ibid (2007) 6.

⁴³ Ibid (2007) 119-138.

“Educational Access in South Africa: Country Research Summary”. Consortium for Research on Education, Access, Transitions and Equity (CREATE). November 2010.

Research findings were put forth by the Consortium for Research on Education, Access, Transitions and Equity (CREATE), with the intention of informing policy dialogue nationally and internationally.⁴⁴ In the area of policy considerations, the report highlights the issues of **language**; the need for a more **welcoming school environment** (both physically and in terms of care and service); the persistence of **corporal punishment**; **quality of teaching and teacher accountability**; and the need for better **learner tracking systems** to boost the level of qualitative analysis that is required for government decision-making.

CREATE has conducted primary research in South Africa since 2007. The CREATE report describes patterns and causes of educational exclusion in South Africa. It identifies children who have been excluded from basic education, establishes the cause of the exclusion, and explores ways of ensuring successful completion of a full cycle of basic education, with a focus on the primary / lower secondary cycle.⁴⁵ Research focused on age-grade progression and the phenomena of over-agedness and repetition; issues of ‘silent exclusion’; and the quality and equity of provision. According to the report, “South Africa enjoys relatively high initial enrolments and a relatively low dropout rate (at least until Grade 9).”⁴⁶

Although the focus of this report was on access to basic education, and it did not explore issues of dropout in the FET phase specifically, the methodology used could be relevant to the GDE dropout study. CREATE conducted case studies in eight schools in Ekurhuleni South district of Gauteng, purposely selected by virtue of being amongst the most deprived areas in terms of income, employment, health, educational and living environment, and proximity to services. Six schools in the Dutywa district of the Eastern Cape were also included. The focus was on learners in Grades 1, 3, 5 and 7 in 2007 and learners in grades 2, 4, 6 and 8 in 2008.

Baseline data collected included registers, repetition data, new admissions, academic records, (learner mark schedules and numeracy tests), Annual School Survey data, and school policy documents. Interviews were conducted with principals, Maths and English educators and district officials. Baseline secondary analysis provided district-level indicators on learners’ degrees of vulnerability (over age, repetition, dropout). Learner profile cards (LPCs) were fully completed for Ekurhuleni South learners and for 596 of the Dutywa learners. LPCs incorporated children’s biographical data, including their social and economic status and degrees of vulnerability (late coming, absenteeism, repetition, living without biological parents, parent / caregiver unemployment, and skipping breakfast). Questionnaires for parents assessed school satisfaction and how they communicated their concerns to the school. A ‘Day in the Life’ method was used, which involved shadowing one class in each grade through one entire day. School and classroom observations were conducted. Community fieldworkers were hired to search for out-of-school children between ages of 7 and 15, as well as older youths who had not completed Grade 9.

⁴⁴ Motala & Dieltiens (2010).

⁴⁵ Motala & Dieltiens (2010) 3.

⁴⁶ Ibid (2010) 4.

The report points out that schooling in South Africa is only compulsory until the end of Grade 9 (or age 15, whichever comes first), but that the government is constitutionally obliged to make the next three years (Grades 10-12) progressively available.

Key findings from this study on patterns and causes of educational exclusion in SA include the following:

Access to basic education in South Africa is extensive: few children do not enrol, daily attendance is high, repetition is low and declining, and dropping out from primary school is rare. Supply and demand up to Grade 9 is sufficient.

- Access to post-basic education is much more limited: there are high levels of repetition and dropout after Grade 9. The progression rate from Grade 1 to Grade 12 is poor (only 46% of learners who started Grade 1 in 1997 reached Grade 12 in 2009).
- Over-agedness is a problem throughout the system, but particularly in the higher grades. “Over-age entry to schooling is being addressed by the age-grade norm policy, but an unintended consequence is that many learners who should repeat are in fact being allowed to progress, and thus actual repetition is being deferred to higher levels of schooling.”
- Poverty and poor nutrition make access to education less than meaningful for the majority of learners.
- Direct costs are being addressed through no fee schools, which sustains a class differentiated education, but which has had “important effects in terms of creating greater access to poorer learners to schools.”
- Indirect costs (like uniforms and transport) are still a huge barrier.
- Many parents are themselves uneducated, and often do not have the time or the motivation to supervise their children’s schoolwork.
- School choice:
 - The majority of poor parents choose schools for their children based primarily on proximity.
 - For parents who can afford higher fees and transport costs, quality of the school is more of a factor in selection.
 - Choice is restricted by competition for places in secondary schools.
 - LoLT limits choice. Some learners have to travel long distances to schools for LoLT, and learning in a language that they are not fluent in constrains achievement. Despite this, many parents prefer children to be taught in English, even when English is not the first language of the educators.
- Low parental participation (i.e. parents do not have a strong voice in the running of the schools) “parallels learners’ low level of meaningful access to education”.
- Parent satisfaction is high in regards to SGB, teachers and quality of education, although the basis for this perception was not clear. (Limited choice? Resigned acceptance? Lack of benchmark?).
- Some learners have negative perceptions of school (again, however, the basis for perception is not clear).
- Corporal punishment is common.

- Repetition in early grades is low due to progression policy, but is “deferred for later years when grade progression becomes more subject to assessment which identifies poor achievement.”
 - There are distinct Socio-Economic Status (SES) and gender patterns in grade repetition.
 - “Repetition as a mediation mechanism is not widespread”: over-agedness seems to be related to under-performance in schools with low literacy and numeracy scores.
- According to the 2007 Community Survey, 386 000 children are out of school. Exclusion is correlated with disability, household structure, poverty, and lack of access to social grants.⁴⁷

***BARRIERS TO EDUCATION STUDY: TECHNICAL REPORT OF THE NATIONAL HOUSEHOLD SURVEY,
December 2009 by Social Surveys Africa and the Centre for Applied Legal Studies.***

The objective of the study was to explore barriers that children face in basic access to and meaningful participation in education in South Africa. Data was collected by means of a nationally representative survey of 4400 households through interviews with caregivers and youths aged 16-18, as well as quantitative findings from the national survey. Issues of enrolment and attendance were examined and a profile of out of school children and youth was compiled.⁴⁸

Youth Perspective: From the sample of 751 in school youth and 61 out of school youth, three issues stood out.

- 1) **Link between absenteeism and dropout:** Out of school youths were more likely to have been absent for non-valid reasons. This supported one of the most frequently reported reasons for leaving school, which was lack of interest in school or a feeling of alienation. (intrinsic)
- 2) **Link between behaviour and dropout:** Out of school youths were more likely to report having used drugs or alcohol at school.
- 3) **Link between ill-treatment at school and dropout:** Out of school youths were more likely to have experienced bullying, violence or assault by a fellow learner.⁴⁹

Caregivers Perspective: Caregivers of youths who had dropped out provided the following reasons for dropouts:

- **Poverty:** In over a third of cases, the context of poverty and the cost of schooling, was cited as a contributing factor for dropout.⁵⁰
- **In-school factors:** These include denied registration, learners being too old, expulsion, abuse from teachers and other learners, poor facilities, and quality of teaching and schools that were not meeting specific needs of learners.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Motala & Dieltiens (2010) 9-11.

⁴⁸ Social Surveys Africa & Centre for Applied Legal Studies (2009) 1-183.

⁴⁹ Ibid (2009) 76.

⁵⁰ Ibid (2009) 7.

⁵¹ Ibid (2009) 8.

The main reasons for dropout provided by youth aged 16 – 18, ranked from most common to least common, were:

- pregnancy and motherhood
- financial barriers
- loss of interest in school and resulting absenteeism
- failure and being too old for a grade
- illness
- victimisation by educator
- peer pressure
- emotional upheaval
- lack of parental support
- other reasons given included a mixture of extrinsic and intrinsic factors, and included drug use, smoking and drinking with friends, chasing girls, involvement in criminal activity, subjects perceived as not being relevant, being wrongly accused by the school of misdeeds, corporal punishment, rape and bewitchment.⁵²

“Learner Absenteeism in the South African Schooling System.” Researched for the DoE by CASE and JET. July 2007.

This report offers definitions of learner absenteeism and related concepts, and explores the prevalence of, and reasons for, absenteeism (both in South Africa and comparatively). It documents International Best Practice for managing absenteeism and attendance policies. It also explores the data monitoring efforts and requirements for tracking absenteeism at school, both at district and province level. These findings could be used as a basis for exploring recommendations for similar strategies in monitoring dropout.

⁵² Ibid (2009) 80-81.

SETTING THE SCENE

It is crucial to understand why learners drop out, because this will assist with both predicting and preventing the phenomenon. Exploring this question in the context of the 30 schools sampled uncovered various factors contributing to the high dropout rate whilst acquiring a more detailed understanding of when and why learners typically drop out. It also emerged that there is a serious lack of consensus between what learners and dropouts believed were the causes and the perceptions of school staff.

The table below summarises reasons provided by respondents for dropping out of school according to three categories: 1) School-related (Pushout); 2) Peer, Home and Community-related (Extrinsic); and 3) Personal Attitudes and Behaviours (Intrinsic).

PUSHOUT	EXTRINSIC FACTORS	INTRINSIC FACTORS
<p>Pushout factors are school-related reasons that were linked to dropping out. Examples included learners who:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ were requested to leave the school due to poor results or by virtue of being too old for their grade ▪ were intentionally given incorrect results causing them to fail ▪ were issued a transfer card by the school due to poor results or referred to ABET or FET against their will ▪ were refused a place in a register class when attempting to return to school after failing a grade ▪ were told to leave due to poor behaviour, without following the formal procedures for suspension or expulsion ▪ could not cope with academic tasks and were not able to access academic support ▪ could not navigate the changes in Assessment Policy between grades nine and ten ▪ had been bullied or excluded by educators and school management 	<p>Extrinsic Factors are peer, home and community related reasons that were linked to dropping out. Examples included learners who:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ were bullied or isolated by their peers ▪ had parents/guardians who were unsupportive of education ▪ lacked finances or impoverishment: needing to work to purchase textbooks, uniforms, food and to support family ▪ been orphaned or living with sick family members 	<p>Intrinsic Factors are personal choices, dispositions, behaviours and circumstances that were linked to dropping out. Examples include learners who :</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ reported low self-esteem ▪ involved in drugs, gangs, crime ▪ could not cope with peer pressure ▪ fell pregnant ▪ prioritised employment opportunities ▪ lost interest in education ▪ believed that the quality of education provided is sub-standard ▪ felt deprived due to poor facilities, particularly in regard to sports

Table 4: Reasons provided by respondents for dropping out of school

It should be noted that usually it is a combination of factors that often lead to dropout.

The following table highlights certain key pieces of information for each of the surveyed schools including: the number of learners in grades 8, 9, and 10; Promotion Power; Cumulative Promotion Index (CPI); and the primary reasons provided by learners, school representatives and dropouts as to why they/others have/might have dropped out (categorised as either intrinsic, extrinsic, or pushout).

Region	School Name	Grade 8 2008	Grade 10 2010	Grade 12 2012	Promotion Power	CPI	Reasons might leave	Reasons forced to leave	School perception	Drop out perception
Ekurhuleni	Caiphuis Nyoka	301	524	108	35.9%	0.23	Transfer	Educator Pressure	Intrinsic	Intrinsic
	Dr Harry Gwala	350	412	128	36.6%	0.43	Transfer	Educator Pressure	Intrinsic	Pushout
	Kwadukathole	109	423	149	136.7%	0.60	Transfer	Educator Pressure	Intrinsic	Extrinsic
	Langaville	N/A	196	54	37.5%	0.18	Transfer	Educator Pressure	Extrinsic	Intrinsic
	Lekamoso	136	201	25	18.4%	0.45	Too Old for School	Too Old for School	Intrinsic	Extrinsic
	Phulong	247	269	116	47.0%	0.18	Transfer	Peer Pressure	Intrinsic	Extrinsic
	Zonkizizwe	260	221	109	41.9%	1.52	Transfer	Peer Pressure	Intrinsic	Extrinsic
Johannesburg	Kwabhekilanga	285	412	101	35.4%	0.11	Transfer	Educator Pressure	Intrinsic	Extrinsic
	Missourilaan	235	392	94	40.0%	0.17	Transfer	Educator Pressure	Intrinsic	Pushout
	Mpheti Mahlatsi	291	422	171	58.8%	0.43	Too Old for School	No Parent Support	Intrinsic	Extrinsic
	Qalabotjha	N/A	261	119	61.3%	0.12	Personal Problems	No Parent Support	Intrinsic	Intrinsic
	Qoqa	39	168	60	153.8%	0.45	Transfer	No Parent Support	Intrinsic	Extrinsic
	Willowmead	261	566	182	69.7%	0.32	Personal Problems	Educator Pressure	Intrinsic	Pushout
Sediberg	Beverly Hills	307	459	188	61.2%	0.22	Transfer	Educator Pressure	Intrinsic	Intrinsic
	Boitumelo	N/A	N/A	120	N/A	0.26	Too Old for School	Educator Pressure	Extrinsic	Pushout
	Jordan	168	192	60	35.7%	0.48	Transfer	Educator Pressure	Intrinsic	Pushout
	Meyerton	102	330	127	124.5%	0.77	Transfer	Educator Pressure	Intrinsic	Extrinsic
	Mopholosi	83	272	80	96.4%	0.19	Transfer	Educator Pressure	Intrinsic	Pushout
	Ratanda	179	331	87	48.6%	0.29	Pregnancy	Peer Pressure	Intrinsic	Pushout
	Rusoord	28	76	28	100.0%	0.21	Personal Problems	Too Old for School	Intrinsic	Extrinsic
	Tsolo	308	474	187	60.7%	0.31	Too Old for School	Educator Pressure	Intrinsic	Extrinsic
Tshwane	DA Mokoma	N/A	67	67	100.0%	0.05	Too Old for School	Too Old for School	Intrinsic	Pushout
	Daspoort	N/A	75	57	76.0%	0.63	Unhappy at School	Peer Pressure	Intrinsic	No Data
	Modiri Technical	117	102	39	33.3%	0.22	Transfer	Educator Pressure	Intrinsic	Pushout
	Phateng	253	340	119	47.0%	0.17	Transfer	Educator Pressure	Intrinsic	Intrinsic
	Seageng	254	227	69	27.2%	0.13	Transfer	Educator Pressure	Intrinsic	Pushout
	Seshong	416	337	129	31.0%	0.06	Unhappy at School	Educator Pressure	Intrinsic	Pushout
	Wozanibone	108	165	30	27.8%	0.19	Transfer	No Parent Support	Intrinsic	Pushout
West Rand	Relebogile	N/A	297	240	80.8%	0.27	Transfer	Too Old for School	Extrinsic	Pushout
	Thuto Pele	344	432	209	60.8%	0.34	Transfer	Educator Pressure	Extrinsic	No Data

Intrinsic
Extrinsic
Pushout

Table 5: Schools at a glance

It is clear when looking at table 3 that there is little consensus among the different respondent groups (learners, school representatives, and dropouts). When the same category of reasons were provided across the different data sources, the actual reasons differed greatly, with school representatives primarily attributing dropout to motivational factors where learners mostly reported wanting to transfer to other schools or to FET colleges. As would be expected, dropouts tended to indicate pushout as the primary reason for having dropped out.

Promotion Power (PP) is a means of measuring a school's ability to progress its learners to subsequent grades. It does so by calculating the percentage of learners in a particular school within a cohort that have gone from grade 8 to grade 12 four years later. PP looks at the school process as if it was a single event (grade 8 – grade 12), and does not take into account learner fluctuations over the four year period or the matric pass rate.

PP is typically calculated by dividing the number of learners in grade 12 by number of learners in grade 8, although it has been adapted for the South African context in which there is usually a pattern of high grade 10 enrolment. A high PP suggests a higher rate of promotion. If there are more learners in grade 12 than there were in grade 10 two years ago the PP can be above 100%.

Cumulative Promotion Index (CPI) is another way of measuring a school's ability to promote learners to the following grade. CPI looks at school as a series of events rather than a single event; starting with grade 8 – 9, and finishing with passing matric. The ratio of the number of learners in one grade to the number of learners in the next grade is calculated for a particular cohort, across the entire school career. These ratios are then multiplied with one another to give the index. Again, however, this has been adapted to suit the South African context in order to account for the high number of grade 10 enrolments.

A CPI of 1 would indicate that year-on-year there is 100% progression. A CPI of 0 would indicate that year-on-year there is a 0% progression rate (or at least for one year there was, as anything multiplied by 0 is 0). If schools consistently take on more learners they can have a CPI of more than 1. It is important to note, however, that CPI is extremely sensitive to fluctuations and a single large change in learner numbers can result in a heavily inflated or underestimated CPI.

SNAPSHOT OF A SCHOOL

Phulong Secondary School provides a snapshot of one of the 30 surveyed schools. While each school in the sample is unique, Phulong illustrates some of dropout dynamics of dropout within the school that echo many others. These include poor enrolment patterns (a peak in grade 10 with a sharp decline by the time the same learners reach grade 12); absenteeism causes; efforts that the school makes to involve parents when enquiring after absent learners; the possible link between absenteeism and eventual dropout; and other commonly reported dropout causes, be it a failure of the system, home or individual circumstances. This case study also demonstrates how perceptions about dropout differ depending on whether the respondent is an educator, current learner or a dropout.

Phulong Secondary School is situated in KwaThema, close to Langaville, in the Ekurhuleni Region. This school vividly illustrates the problem of dropout between grades eight and twelve in Gauteng. It is a fee paying school and rated Quintile 4. Its matric pass rate was 49% in 2010, and 94% in 2011. At the same time, the repetition rate for grades 10 and 11 in 2011 were 53.5% and 61.9% respectively. When reviewing learner enrolment numbers in this school between 2010 and 2012, there is a 76% decline from male learners in grade 10 in 2010, to those in grade 12 this year; and a similar decline (73%) among female learners. This suggests possible pushout. As one learner phrased it, *“we were told that it would be better if we left and when we did not leave, they made me fail.”*

Using data from the 2008, 2010 and 2012 SNAP Survey, learner enrolment increased by 9% from grade 8 in 2008 to grade 10 in 2010 at Phulong. However, enrolment then declined by 57% between grade 10 in 2010 and grade 12 in 2012. The following table shows how the number of learners in the 2008 grade 8 cohort peaks in grade 10 and declines by more than half in grade 12. This is represented in table below. There are no records available at the school as to what has happened to these learners.

School Name		PHULONG SECONDARY SCHOOL					
Region		EKURHULENI					
EMIS Number		351007					
Learner Progression From Grade 8 -12 (SNAP data)							
Grade 8 2008		Grade 10 2010		Grade 11 2011		Grade 12 2012	
Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
124	123	138	131	84	110	47	69

Table 6: Phulong learner enrolment figures for grades 8 to 12 (2008-2012 cohort)

The Deputy Principal, School Based Support Team and School Assessment Team Coordinators indicated both knows about and applies the GDE Attendance Policy. Both educators reported a similar process by which the school addresses this issue; someone at the school is tasked with

making contact with the learners' parents either telephonically or in person at least once, and if this fails, then the school takes the decision on whether or not the learner should be deregistered.

The primary reason reported by learners for long-term absenteeism was illness. Frequent moving and financial difficulties were also raised. Educators reported that learners often do not indicate their reasons for absenteeism and so the school is not always able to provide necessary support. Whatever the reason, there was consensus amongst the educators that high rates of absenteeism commonly lead to drop outs because of the learners' frustrations of falling behind in their school work and no longer coping with the workload.

There are multiple reasons for absenteeism and drop out at the school. Half of the absenteeism included illness, followed by "other" at 21%, financial difficulties for 12%, care-giving responsibilities for 10%, and moving from place to place at 7%. Interviews with actual drop outs, however, did not confirm that absenteeism leads to drop outs, as four of the five learners reported no long periods of absenteeism whilst the fifth learner did not respond to this question.

Educators reported that the "other" category included pregnancy as the most common reason amongst female learners, whilst the reasons for male learners include family responsibilities, poor academic performance, constant repetition of grades and frustration due to being older than other learners (either as a result of grade repetitions or starting school late).

Interestingly, the dropouts reported external problems resulting from the school and the educators. Dropouts actually reported going to extra lengths (attending study groups for example) to try and keep up with the work and perform better.

Dropouts directly implicated educators of unfairly marking them down, whilst another learner stated that due to the educators' lack of concern for the students generally, the learner was unable to keep up with and understand the work; *"They gave up on me"*. One learner provided an example of how educators had asked them to leave because of their age, and when they refused the educator purposefully failed them - an example of pushout.

Of those who left school voluntarily, four of the five reported the reason being the poor quality of education and unfair treatment from the educators. The fifth would not indicate why she had left the sampled school. Of the four who did, three said that educators could have put in more effort, whilst the fourth said that the principal had done what he could.

There seems to be consensus amongst educators as to when dropping out is most likely to occur; i.e. during the transition from the fourth term to the first term the following year. All of the respondents suggested that learners *"just do not return to school the following year"*. Interviews with learners who left the school confirmed this, as four out of the five learners who left the school reported that the last term they attended was the fourth term. However, it was also reported that the second term is also a time when dropout occurs as learners struggle with the pressure resulting from exams and can consequently drop out.

The school does accept learners in grades ten and eleven who are transferring in from other locations. The Principal and educators reported that learners who had come in pursuit of a better education were no more likely to drop out than existing enrolled learners.

The school has learners which they believe will not pass the Senior Certificate examinations. The reasons identified included hunger, continuous grade repetition, age, and overall poor academic performance. The school reported that they provide additional support in the form of feeding schemes, motivational talks, and mentoring programmes.

All of the educators also mentioned referring learners to Special Education Schools, Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) Centres and Further Education and Training (FET) Colleges. Despite trying, the schools report that they receive limited assistance and support from the District and the learners' parents, and the colleges are over-subscribed.

There was limited evidence of learner monitoring and record keeping within the school and records were not available for review by the Basic Blue fieldworker. No records for learners who have been referred to special education facilities, FET Colleges or ABET Centres or learner records for those who are in the process of referral were available, nor could the school provide any information about learners who had left the school.

The interviews with the learners who dropped out showed that three of the five students had repeated a grade more than three times, one of the learners repeated a grade once, and the fifth learner would not provide information, confirming the impression that grade repetition places one at higher risk of dropout as learners become discouraged with the education system.

Only one of the five learners is a true drop out. Three are currently in FET colleges, one is employed, and the fifth one would not provide information. This alludes to poor record keeping and learner tracking within the school.

FINDINGS

This section begins by presenting a summary of the findings from the perspective of each respondent group; learners, dropouts and school representatives. (Detailed data to support these findings is presented in Appendix D). The section ends with analysis of the findings, highlighting the three categories of factors, (i.e. Pushout, Extrinsic and Intrinsic Factors), the repetition crisis and the schools’ responses to the problem of dropping out.

The Learner Perspective

Why learners are asked to leave school

Learners in grades 10-12 at all of the schools in the sample were asked if they knew of learners who were asked to leave school in grade 10 or 11 and why.

In grade 10, 28% of males and 24% of females answered yes. In grade 11, 32% of males and 31% of females answered yes. In grade 12, 32% of males and 30% of females answered yes.

The top three reasons learners gave for this were (in order):

- 1) Ill-discipline
- 2) Too old
- 3) Repeated the grade too many times.

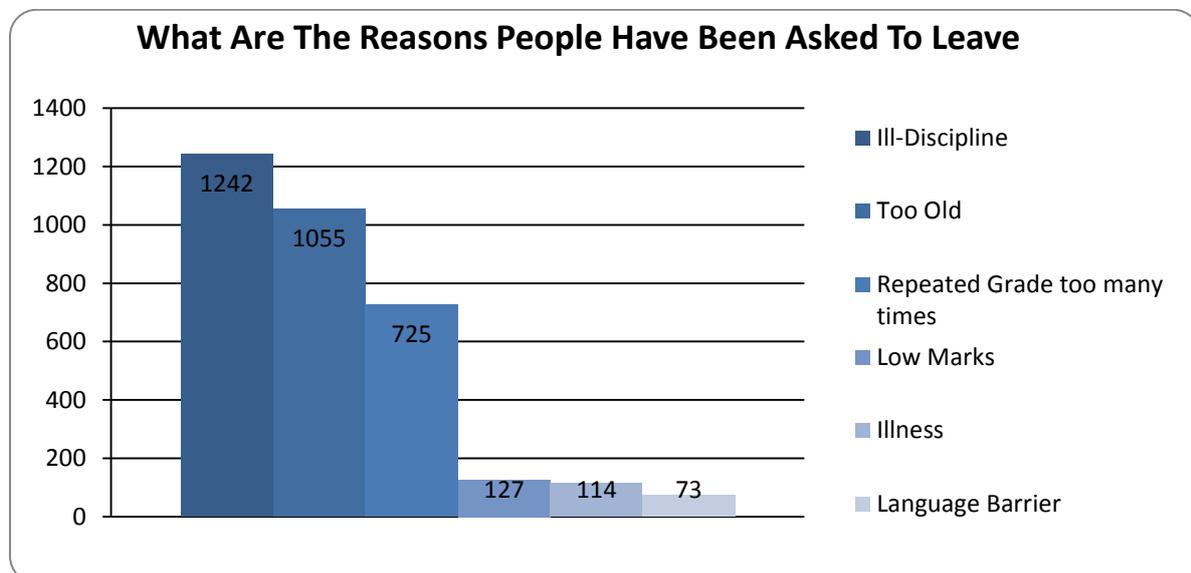


Figure 4: Reasons provided by learners when asked why they thought others had been asked to leave school

The above graph illustrates the reasons provided by learners when asked why they thought others had been asked to leave their school. The most common perception on the part of learners is that it is other learners’ poor behaviour that is giving the school reason to ask them to leave school. The second most common perception is that their fellow learners who have been asked to leave is

because of being too old for their grade. The third most common perception is that repeating a grade too many times is why learners have been asked to leave school.⁵³

Why do you think learners were asked to leave?

“Drinking at school.”

“Substance abuse, gambling.”

“Pointing teacher with a knife.” “Stabbing another learner.”

“Found with Nyaope.”

“They corrupt the school”

“Absenteeism.”

“Pregnancy.”

⁵³ Note: Chart depicts number of students who provided each reason. Not all students who knew someone who had been asked to leave provided a reason.

Why Learners might leave

Learners in grades 10-12 at all of the schools in the sample were asked if they thought they might not finish school and why.

In grade 10, 13% of males and 9% of females answered yes. In grade 11, 7% of males and 5% of females answered yes. In grade 12, 5% of males and 3% of females answered yes.

The top two reasons learners gave for this were (in order):

- 1) Transfer to another school
- 2) Transfer to FET

Being unhappy at school, personal problems and being too old for school were the next most commonly reported reasons.

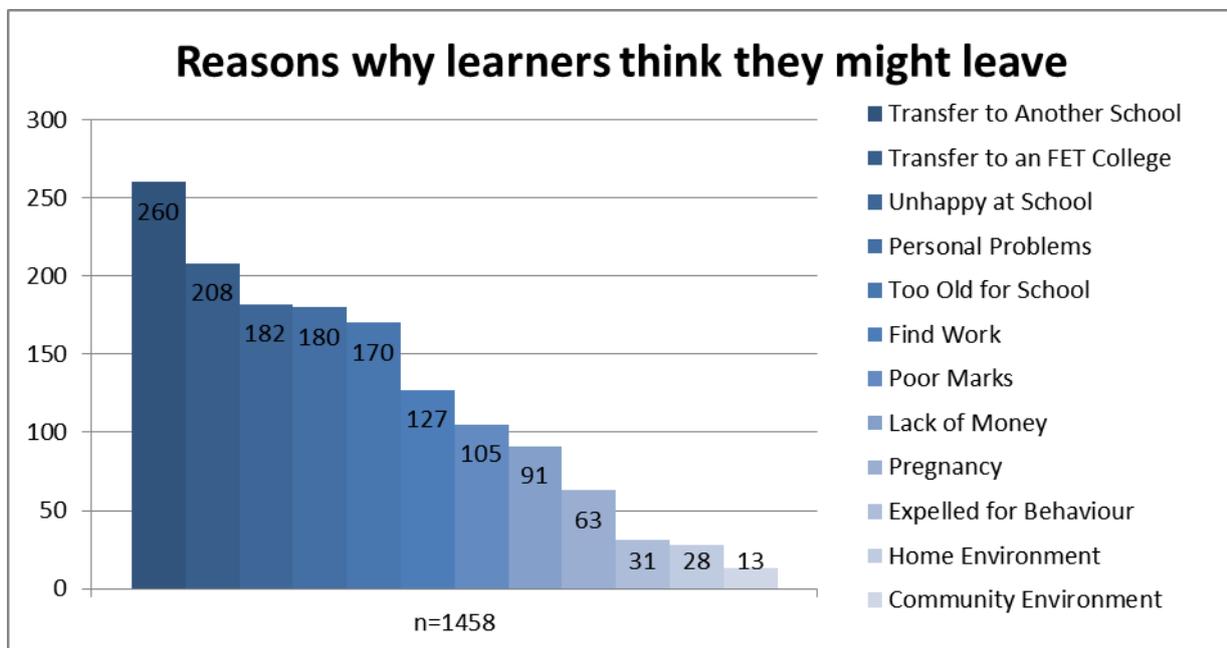


Figure 5: Why learners think they might leave

Why do you think you might leave?

“I am taking care of my younger siblings.”

“Financial problems” “I might go to prison.”

“Spiritual phenomenon.” “Sangoma.”

“Found work” “I don’t have a birth certificate.” “Not managing to concentrate.”

Feeling Pushed Out

Learners in grades 10-12 at all of the schools in the sample were asked if they are feeling pressured to leave school and why.

In grade 10, 14% of males and 10% of females answered yes. In grade 11, 12% of males and 10% of females answered yes. In grade 12, 13% of males and 9% of females answered yes.

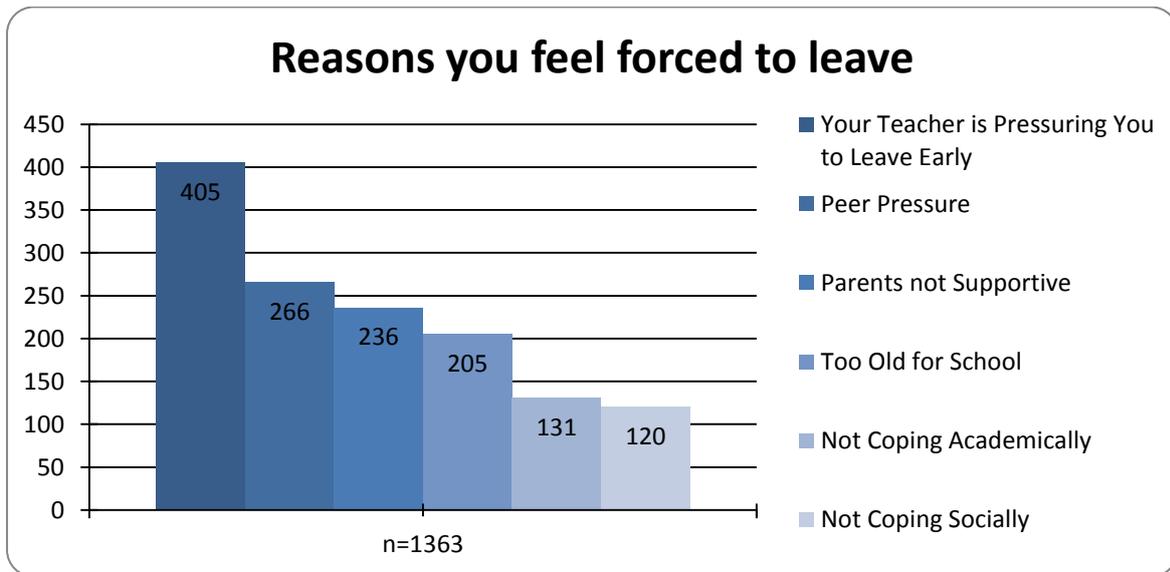


Figure 6: Reasons learners feel forced to leave

Perceived Pushout was reported across all schools. It was also the most commonly reported reason for learners feeling forced out of school. The way pushout is being perceived by learners includes:

For the respondents who answered yes to feeling pressure to leave school, the learner questionnaires provided an option for open ended answer. These answers showed that many learners are unhappy at school due to reported beatings, humiliation and feeling unwanted.

Why do you feel pressured to leave school?

“Teacher is always breaking you down.” “They beat us at school.”

“Our principal is forcing us to leave” “Teachers discriminating us.” “When it is cold they take our jerseys”

“The teacher does not love me.” “No one cares about us.”

“They rob our marks. What do we do when the school gives us the wrong marks?”

“Principal, please do something!”

The Dropout Perspective

We interviewed a total of 138 dropouts from all 30 schools. As shown in figure 2 below, half of them reported being “at home, doing nothing,” 21% reported engaging in some form of employment, 15% were enrolled in an FET college, 7% were enrolled in ABET, and 6% were seeking employment.

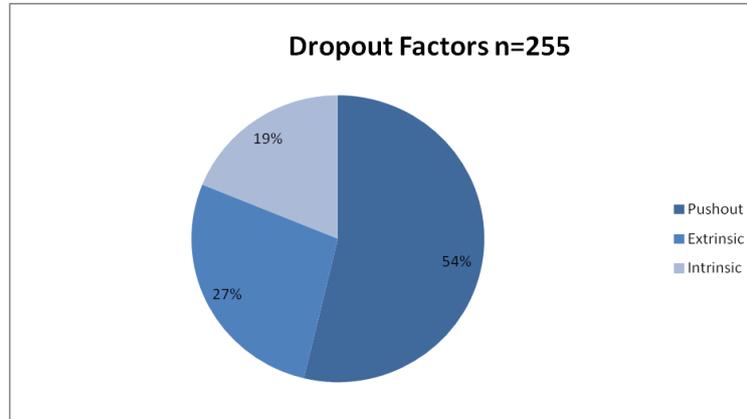


Figure 7: Dropout Factors

The most commonly reported reasons for dropping out by dropouts were age, grade repetition, poor school quality or conditions, and external family-related issues. Of the 255 reasons provided by dropouts, Pushout was the most commonly cited factor (54% of the time). This was followed by extrinsic factors (27% of the time), and intrinsic reasons (19% of the time).

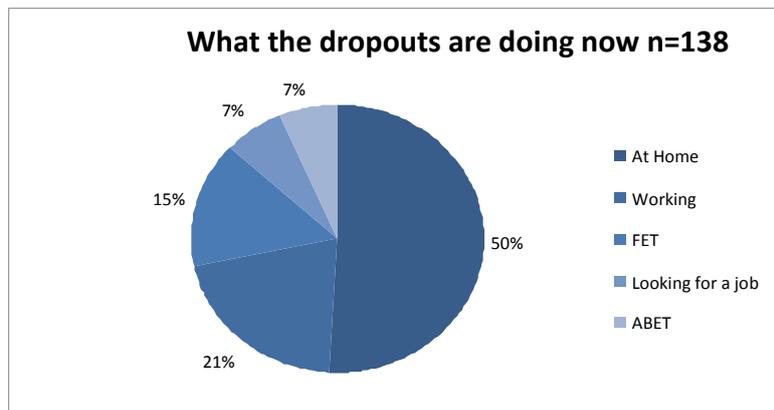


Figure 8: Overview of what the dropouts from the 30 schools are currently doing

Most of the interviewed dropouts had repeated a grade. Grade 10 was the most commonly repeated grade amongst dropouts, followed by grade 11. A common complaint from dropouts was that learners were unable to progress to the following grades because either there were mistakes in the

calculation of grades, or grades were purposefully being calculated incorrectly to prevent learners from progressing.

Boys were more likely dropout due to Pushout and Extrinsic reasons, while the girls were more likely to cite intrinsic reasons.

Most dropouts exited the school after the fourth term after receiving notice that they had failed the grade. What appeared to be the most prevalent indicators which can be used to predict when/if dropout is going to occur, came from the interviews with dropouts, were age, grade, and if they had repeated a grade. Nearly all of the dropouts interviewed had repeated at least one grade. Of these, most had repeated grade 10, followed by grade 11. Furthermore, most of these learners were still in grade 10 at the time they dropped out. From these interviews, grade 10 appears to be the critical year in determining whether or not learners will proceed to grade 12 and beyond, or if they will drop out.

“They chased me away.”

“They said I was too old.”

“They would give the girls extra marks – they passed, but not us, not the boys.”

“All I wanted was a class.”

“I want to be educated.”

“The teachers mocked me.”

“Teachers did not know how to talk to us.”

“The other boys would hit me and I would go to the principal and ask for help but he would do the same.”

“We were helped but not with what we had problems with. My problems were never fixed, my questions were never answered. It was the same with the whole class.”

The Educator Perspective

School representatives were asked several questions pertaining to dropout in terms of gender differences, the grades in which learners typically drop out, and the relationships between absenteeism and grade repetition and dropout. When asked if one gender was more susceptible to dropping out, various answers were provided across the regions.

School representatives often indicated that either there was little difference across the genders, or that females were more likely to drop out due to pregnancy. It is interesting to note, however, that when attempting to contact dropouts, far more males were uncovered than females. This might not prove conclusive in asserting that more males drop out than females, but it does bring into question how schools track former learners.

Educators also alluded to a relationship between prolonged and consistent absenteeism and dropout, stating that staying away from school tends to become a habit, or that interviewed learners fall behind in their allocated tasks and work schedules and are unable to catch up or deal with the pressure. The interviews with dropouts, however, revealed that very few had been absent for longer than a week prior to dropping out.

School representatives did not report age and repetition as a contributor to dropout which suggests that schools might not be aware of the real factors affecting dropouts.

When asked when the majority of dropouts occur, schools frequently reported that most learners drop out in the second term or that learners do not return the following year (they fall out between the end of the fourth term and the start of the first term the following year). However, there was little consensus across, and even within the regions as to one particular term where dropouts are the highest. The rationale given by educators for dropping out in the second term was the learners' inability to handle exam pressure, while this was not the case in the interviews with dropouts who tended to drop out in the fourth term after having failed. Again, educators and school staff do not appear to be fully aware of when dropouts are most likely to occur.

"These learners come from other schools as failures and don't really change their attitudes and eventually end up dropping out. Then they repeat that cycle and grade again, they go to another school and do the same thing. Till they run out of schools then they sit at home."

"The dropout situation is beyond our control. The government's education system is failing us because they are putting unnecessary pressure on the learners."

"How do you encourage a learner who has failed numerous times?"

The reasons that school representatives attributed to learners drop out, included illness, financial difficulties, family responsibilities, and frustration with grade repetition. The most frequent answers were:

- Females are more likely to drop out because they fall pregnant.
- If males drop out, it is usually because of drugs, crimes, and other external factors.
- In general, students drop out in the second term because they cannot handle exam pressure.

These were the most unanimous responses across schools, regions, and the entire province. The larger implication from the schools' perspectives was that the reasons for dropping out always result from the learner and his/her life outside of school, but never from within the school. Of those reasons, females falling pregnant, and males becoming involved with criminal activities were the most prevalent. Findings from dropouts, however, were in conflict with those uncovered in the above interviews.

"We are experiencing a high pregnancy rate, which causes most of our female learners to dropout. Even if the law allows them back, they just do not return to school."

Whilst the schools regarded pregnancy, negative external activities, and inability to handle exam pressure in the second term as the most frequent reasons for learners dropping out, these reasons hardly appeared in the interviews with the dropouts. Whilst pregnancy came up fairly often (pregnancy or having to raise a child), it was certainly not the most commonly reported reason. Furthermore, inability to handle exam pressure did not surface even once during the interviews.

The GDE Policy on Learner Attendance (33150 as published in Government Gazette 4 May 2010) which stipulates that 10 school days, or 14 consecutive days, constitutes learner de-registration. In contrast, school respondents stated that while they are aware of the policy guiding the de-registration process, many of the schools do not adhere to it. Answers to the question of how long a learner has to be absent in order to be deregistered included:

HOW LONG BEFORE YOUR SCHOOL DEREGISTERS LEARNERS?	
Less than 10 days	2
10 days	30
10-20 days	15
Greater than 20 days	9
Unclear/Did not know/Not Sure	7

Figure 7: Duration Expressed for De-Registration of a Learner by School Managers/Educators

Many staff members alluded to a lack of flexibility within the policy not allowing them to adequately address individual cases. This has resulted in schools deviating from the attendance policy.

Furthermore, staff indicated that there is a lack of guidance in terms of how to deal with learners who have been absent for a prolonged period of time. In most cases it was stated that the school makes a concerted effort to try and contact the learner and his/her parents to determine what the problem is and if it can be addressed. Then, when parental follow-up is not effective or possible, the decision to deregister the learner is made.

Schools who claim to have greater parent participation also indicate a higher success rate of maintaining their learners, primarily due to their ability to track the learners both in and out of school, and ensure that they attend school. Parental involvement, however, appears to be lacking in many of the schools who were included in the sample. This in conjunction with the lack of guidelines stipulate in the GDE policy make it difficult for schools to effectively address the issue of learner dropout.

We call parents for a couple of times and sometimes we send other learners to go and find out about the absent learner, but after a term we deregister the learner.”

“After 15 days we deregister the learner.”

“We write a letter to the parents and if there is no response after three tries then we withdraw the learner.”

“It depends on when the class teacher will intervene, most of the time it is 5 days.”

“We usually call parents to find out but if even if we cannot get hold of them we cannot deregister the learners because the GDE does not allow us.”

- Educator Interviews

Pushout Factors

All surveyed schools indicated that they have learners whom they believe will not make it to matric. The most common actions reported by schools were to refer these learners to an FET College or an ABET Centre, suggesting that this is a structured formal process that takes place within the school. Educators and school representatives indicated that this is a major barrier as many learners do not wish to attend these colleges, they are located some distance away, tuition costs are high and schools lack any links with FET Colleges or ABET Centres. Educators reported that there is a stigma associated with FET Colleges, parents do not understand the National Qualifications Framework and that this deters learners from transitioning into an FET College.

Telephonic interviews with dropouts revealed that the transition was ad hoc, there was no formal referral system in place or follow up as to whether such learners were in fact attending these alternative educational institutions. This is a major administrative shortfall as many learners remain 'unaccounted for.' Contrary to this, Principals indicated that they were not allowed to formally refer a learner to an FET College without the written consent of parents. This suggests that there may be a large number of learners suitable for FET Colleges who are biding time in the ordinary schooling system, and likely contributing to the high level of repetition in grade ten. The practice of 'Sifting' or 'Pushout' was not explicitly referred to in any educator interviews but the loose system utilised by schools to refer learners (who are performing poorly or who are too old for their grade) to ABET and FET is being perceived by learners as pressure to leave the school.

ABET classes were being hosted at one Sedibeng school during school hours. Learners were arbitrarily referred to these classes, not only for age-related reasons.

When handled appropriately, structured referral to FET Colleges and ABET does provide an alternative for learners who are unlikely to make it through the public ordinary schooling system. These are instances where learners may have explicitly chosen to transfer or consented to this transfer, and are not regarded as pushout. If properly administered, there should be verifiable school records. The absence of these records in surveyed schools suggest that referral is ad hoc, it is not always done with the learners best interests in mind and takes the form of pushout.

PUSHOUT: REFERRED TO ABET

One learner who had dropped out experienced being referred to ABET as being 'pushed out'. He explained how when he was in grade 10 for the 2nd time, he was told that his marks were too low and that he would have to go to an ABET Centre to continue his studies. As a result he decided to leave school.

PUSHOUT: OVER-AGED LEARNERS

A learner who had dropped out of a Tshwane school told the interviewer that the teachers warned those who were going to turn 21 in the following year that they could not repeat grade 10. They were not given formal notices in the form of a letter. "They told us that all of us who were going to be 21 in grade 10 cannot come back. "They said my years were done." principal gave me a letter."

However, there are instances where learners do choose to leave the public ordinary schooling system to transfer to an FET College, and the provision of bursaries for promising learners addresses some of the barriers to access. In fact, of the 1268 learners who indicated that they might leave school, 208 (17%) indicated that transferring to an FET College would be one possible reason.

Mistakes in calculating marks

Some schools reported minor inaccuracies when calculating marks. All schools suggested that these were minor system errors and that these matters were identified and resolved. However, interviews with dropouts revealed experiences where a learner had received the same report card two years in a row and learners believing they were given incorrect results.

Ill-discipline

Among learners who were no longer attending school, 3% cited being asked to leave by the school due to bad behaviour. While this is a very small sample, only 1 of these learners was asked to leave after a formal process of suspension and expulsion. The issue of ill-discipline featured most commonly among male learners who had left school. Incidents of ill-discipline included using dagga and alcohol at school and late coming. In one school in Johannesburg, learners were suspended for late coming.

PUSHOUT: WRONGLY FAILED?

A learner who had dropped out in Tshwane told the story of how she had failed for the third time and maintained that this was because she was given incorrect marks. She believed that the teachers had not calculated her class mark from all the other terms and that the marks reflected on her report card were not hers. Her grandmother went to the school and filed a complaint but the issue was never resolved. As a result, she dropped out of school. Another dropout reported that teachers would “cheat students of marks, students that they disliked.” She felt that there was no recourse. “Student complaints were not taken into consideration when taken to office. “I left because I received a duplicate of my report card. I got a 2010 report card again in 2011.”

Extrinsic Factors

These are barriers that exist at home or the community that have resulted in a learner dropping out of school.

- needing to work to purchase textbooks and to support family
- being ostracised at school for being an orphan or living with sick family members
- impoverished

Home environment

Educators who were interviewed indicated that some of the reasons for absenteeism and dropout were child headed households, children living alone, financial problems and living with extended family. Each of these circumstances affected attendance at school and was identified as a reason for learners dropping out.

The issue of parents not being involved in their child's education was raised by both school representatives and dropouts who were interviewed telephonically. Schools reported that it is difficult to reach parents and parents often do not respond to their request to attend meetings with educators. Despite this, the most common intervention to address dropout that was reported by schools was to call the parents and request them to visit the school.

Lack of support from parents is a prominent reason for why learners felt forced to leave school. Across all regions, this was 15% of reasons provided by male learners and 21% of female learners respectively. There were no common patterns across regions. This issue was most common among male learners in Ekurhuleni (19%) and female learners (23%) in Sedibeng and Tshwane respectively.

"When I came back from school, I had to find food to live"

"The road was quiet and my sister did not have somebody to take me home

-Dropout Interviews

Illness

Illness was cited as the most common reason for absenteeism longer than a week by learners. This was not cited as a reason for dropout by school representatives. Only 12% of dropouts indicated that they had been absent from school for more than a week before dropping out. Illness was the main reason provided by these learners. Absenteeism due to illness is not restricted to learners being unwell but also includes learners who are absent because they are caring for sick family members. This is a particular issue among children who are caring for siblings or parents who are ill. Schools reported that they tended to hear about illness from other learners and many were reluctant to enquire directly due to fear they would be invading family privacy. This was picked up as a particular issue in Ekurhuleni and West Rand.

Intrinsic Factors

These reasons pertain to a learner's individual circumstances and tend to be non-curricular in nature such as

- Lack of Motivation to remain in school
- Peer Pressure
- low self-esteem
- drugs, gangs, crime, pregnancy
- going to work

Motivation

Motivation has a significant influence on whether a learner chooses to persevere against all odds to remain in school. This can include travelling long distances, working to cover school costs and can extend to those learners who despite repeating a grade numerous times, choose to persevere and remain in that grade. Those who persist in school but are unlikely to complete are often referred to as "persisters".

There is a considerable difference between the number of learners in grades ten (63%) and 11 (19%) who indicated that they might leave school. This suggests that grade ten, the critical year, is the tipping point. Learners who make it through grade ten are more likely to persevere with the intention to complete grade 12.

Motivation was an issue that came up during interviews with dropouts and was closely related to grade repetition. This is tied to the value that young people attach to education, and whether learners regard it as important to complete grade 12 to enjoy a bright future.

Educators reported that there are some schools which seem to absorb learners who have dropped out of a number of schools in the surrounding vicinity, resulting in a 'pooling' of bad behaviour and performance. This suggests that there are learners who continue to attend school but are not motivated by the desire to complete school.

Educators did indicate that they try and motivate learners to remain in school through holding motivational talks and encouraging learners to persevere, though this was not always evident. Two dropouts indicated that the school could have done more for them.

Latecoming was raised as an issue in schools, with some learners arriving as late as midday. While there have been concerted efforts to clamp down on latecoming, it can also be about motivation and

INTRINSIC FACTORS: MOTIVATION

Some dropouts said they left school due to their perception that the quality of their education they were receiving was sub-standard. "Our teachers have their own children in better schools, so they do not teach well.... Teachers are not disciplined...there is no learning." One dropout claimed that nothing caused her to drop out; she just decided to stay at home. "I have no plans."

Others made remarks like this:

"I got lazy for school."

"I live in a squatter camp; there is no one to look up to here."

discipline. Where learners are not motivated by school, they are less likely to reach school in time. Though this may be more of a logistical issue, learners being late for school was flagged in one school in Sedibeng where learners walk considerable distances to reach scholar transport.

Peer Pressure

When asked if learners felt forced to leave, peer pressure appears as the second largest factor that contributes to learners feeling forced to leave their current school. This was highest among male learners in Ekurhuleni (24%) and female learners in Sedibeng (20%). This is compared with 21% of reasons provided by male learners and 17% by female learners across all surveyed schools in the province.

The pressure takes the form of learners feeling ostracised for being overage, and female learners feeling like they should leave because their peers have also left. Other learners experienced bullying at school, and this was often related to children who were identified as orphans.

Poor Behaviour

This refers specifically to learners who have exhibited poor and sometimes criminal behaviour at school. Educators cited crime as the most common reason why male learners were dropping out of school, often due to substance abuse. Other criminal activities included gang activity in one school in Gauteng and involvement in a copper theft syndicate in Tshwane. Learners reported that many learners had been asked to leave for 'corrupting the school.' This phrase is used to refer to bad behaviour at school.

Pregnancy

School representatives reported that pregnancy was the biggest reason that female learners were dropping out from school. Amongst the dropouts interviewed, 23% of female dropouts had dropped out due to pregnancy. Two of the male learners had dropped out after their girlfriend fell pregnant and needing to support the baby. Of the learners who indicated that they might leave school, 127 indicated that pregnancy would likely be one of the reasons. Girls who had left after falling pregnant indicated that they did not return as they needed to look after their baby, and it was not easy to go back. In one instance, the dropout had been told by the Principal not to return until the following year.

Personal problems

Personal problems that were cited by learners included conflict at home, parental separation or moving to stay with different family members. There are also individual instances of dropout that were cited by schools which include a learner being trafficked, learners being isolated for not having attended initiation school like their peers or female learners in

INTRINSIC FACTORS: PREGNANCY

One dropout said, that she left school due to pregnancy (her third) and I couldn't stay at home for the rest of the year and not to return immediately after having her baby. She wanted to go back but they said the baby would interfere with her schooling even though she told the teachers that her mother would help her with the baby. "I was pushed to leave by the deputy principal because he said the baby would be in the way and that the baby would need me to be at home. But I wanted to stay; I wanted to go back after having my baby."

relationships with older men. The lack of available support to learners has come to mean that many learners are left to cope on their own. This is often difficult, resulting in learners attending school erratically and placing such learners at higher risk of dropout. Across all surveyed schools, personal problems constituted 12% of reasons provided by male learners and 13% by female learners. Incidents of personal problems were higher in West Rand for males (18%) and Sedibeng for females (16%).

“We had an interesting case where a boy was from Swaziland and I suspect that the boy was one of the kids who were involved in human trafficking. A white woman was using him to look after her property. Something then went missing there and I think she wanted to get the boy killed. He then ran away, and didn’t come to school anymore. We then managed to track him down and then took him to the social workers.” - Educator Interview

Discrimination by Educators

Discrimination by educators featured among interviews with dropouts and learner surveys. This took the form of racism and learners being treated unfairly by teachers. Learners reported that teachers did not like them and being told they were going to fail before they submitted assignments or wrote exams. Other students in Ekurhuleni indicated that the Principal had hit them, being beaten at school. The issue of being beaten at school came up in Ekurhuleni, Johannesburg, Sedibeng and Tshwane. Within all surveyed schools, being unhappy at school constituted 12% provided by both male and female learners as to why they may leave school. Though teachers are not the only aspect to happiness at school, the learning experience does have influence on how a learner feels at school.

AGE AND GRADE REPETITION

Age and grade repetition can be seen as directly related phenomena, as consistent grade repetition results in learners being older than their peers who have not repeated less often. Learners were frustrated with having to repeat the same grade several times, they felt they were being unfairly held back, they felt they were too old for school, or they were told by the teachers, principal, their peers, or their parents that they were too old for school. Issues such as insufficient money, family responsibility, illness, relocation, and violence did arise, however the most identifiable patterns were in regard to the reasons mentioned above.

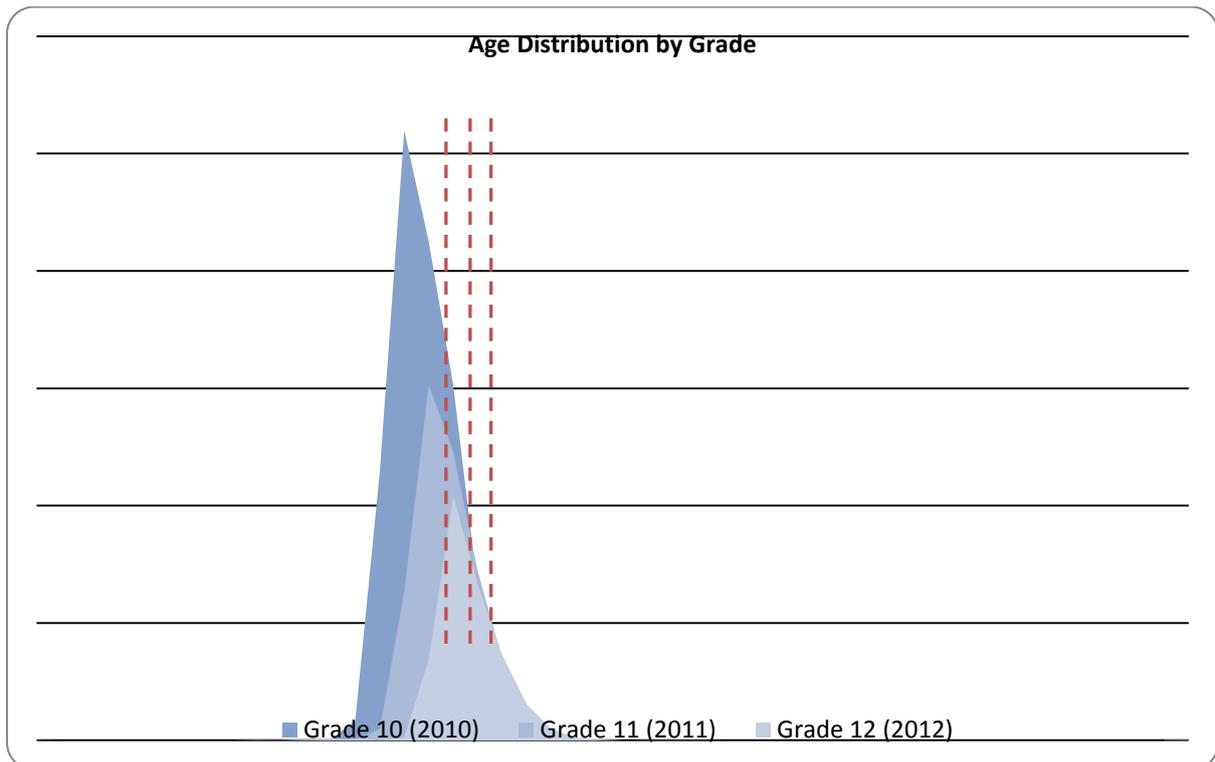


Figure 8: Age distribution by Grade in the 30 Surveyed Schools

The above figure uses EMIS data to track a single cohort of learners in Grade 10 in 2010 to Grade 12 in 2012. This group of learners will be used to illustrate the changes in age versus Grade distribution. This is not a true cohort since individual learner level information is not available. It is not possible to do a true learner cohort without unit level data which is not available under the current DBE reporting framework.

Without learner migration, repeat learners, over reporting and drop outs, one would expect the distribution to look the same from 2010-2012. Since it is not possible to discount all of these factors, the distribution of learners in the above table shows notable changes from one year to the next.

There are several facts which become clear from this:

- Many learners are in Grades for which they are too young. There are 13 year olds recorded as being in Grade 10, 14-15 year olds in Grade 11, and 16 year olds in Grade 12. Either these are data issues, in which learners reported the incorrect age, or learners are being promoted far too quickly. Likely it is a combination of both.

- There are many older learners. Learners as old as 22-24 can be found in Grades 10-12, and there is even an individual who is 48 years old in Grade 10. Starting a year late and given two repeated years, the learners should still not be older than 20. The effect of these learners on other learners is beyond the scope of this report to assess though it is a cause for concern. This gives a strong indication that ABET and FET Colleges are not enrolling the older learners but rather they are staying on to try and complete at an ordinary school.

It is important to note that often age data is not correctly reported. Parents have incentive to place their children into Grade 1 sooner and educators are known to modify birthdates to allow learners to repeat a Grade. The enforcement of strict age/Grade rules may be resulting in erroneous data being reported.

Many learners also experienced difficulty transitioning from grade 9 to grade 10.

When school representatives were asked if there had ever been errors in grade calculations, respondents indicated that there had been no mistakes. Where a few cropped up they were corrected before being reported to the learners and district. Furthermore, many school representatives justified this by explaining that there are systems in place to ensure learners never receive incorrect marks (some stating that they are personally responsible for this). Yet again there appears to be no agreement between the views of the dropouts and the educators.

Repetition in Grade 10

Among the surveyed schools, there is a high incidence of grade repetition in grade ten, with some learners having repeated grade ten up to four times. Overall, 60% of male learners and 45% of female learners had repeated a grade, with 57% of male learners and 55% of female learners within the sample having repeated grade ten at least once. Learners who eventually dropout due to grade repetition, also known as quiet dropouts, tend to be those who become victims of the system but do not seek attention from school authorities, and tend to 'accept their lot.'

There are clear correlations between having repeated a grade, being overage due to repetition, considering leaving school before grade 12 and feeling forced to leave school. These are the kinds of learners who leave the public ordinary schooling system feeling very discouraged.

Within the sample, more learners who had repeated a grade indicated that they might leave school before finishing grade 12 as compared to those who had not repeated a grade. This was highest in Tshwane, with 16% of male and 14% of female learners who might leave school having repeated a grade. Within this sample, 78% of learners who felt forced to leave had repeated a grade. The most common reasons provided for feeling forced to leave in Tshwane were your teacher is pressuring you to leave early (35% of reasons provided by male learners and 24% among female learners). This is consistent with figures for all surveyed schools of 34% among male and 24% of female learners who feel forced to leave reporting that they are being pressurised by their teacher to leave early. This pressure takes the form of being told that they will fail, being told that they are too old and that they must go to an FET College. Despite the GDE's endeavours to ensure that learners remain with their age cohort and are referred to appropriate educational streams when they are overage (FET Colleges and ABET for example), it is clear that some learners feel forced to go to these colleges

against their wishes, resulting in some learners dropping out and staying at home. The referrals to FET and ABET seem to be generally ad hoc with limited follow up.

Within the sample of dropouts who were interviewed telephonically from all schools, 80% had repeated a grade. Of those who had repeated a grade, 65% had repeated grade 10. This confirms that frustration from repeating too many grades is a dominant theme in dropout.

Aging out

Being overage for one's grade and consequently older than one's peers was a common reason provided by dropouts who were interviewed telephonically. This has two elements: that of being too old and feeling out of place among ones' peers and schools perceiving learners to be too old and thus referring them out to ABET and FET Colleges. The issue of being too old is closely related to learners having repeated a grade numerous times. Schools reported that problems arose where older learners intimidated younger learners and tended to remain in school to keep themselves busy.

"My school did not give learners reports on time. Learners would be mocked because of their age. Since we are so old we should leave and to make us leave, they made us fail." Dropout Interview

Survey data indicates that the majority of learners started grade 1 with the appropriate age cohort with only 0.1% starting grade 1 after seven years of age. The oldest learner to start grade 1 was nine years old. However, the oldest learner in each grade is considerably older than their age cohort. The oldest female learners in grade 10 and 11 were 23 and 28 years old in grade 12. Among male learners, the oldest grade 10 learner was 48 years of age, 24 and 27 years of age for grades 11 and 12 respectively. This suggests that learners are either leaving and returning to the school system, or are repeating grades once in the system, causing them to become too old.

When learners were asked if they felt forced to leave, 23% of female learners in Sedibeng indicated that being too old was the reason that they felt forced to leave. This is considerably higher than the 16% of female learners across the province who felt forced to leave because of their age. In comparison, 21% of male learners in Sedibeng felt forced to leave because of their age, as compared to 14% of learners across all surveyed schools.

What are schools doing to address dropout?

There are various ways in which to address learners who are not performing adequately within the school, such as internal strategies employed by the schools, ABET/FET colleges, and referrals for learners with special needs. Representatives from the schools included in the sample were probed in regard to these in terms of strategies the schools currently have in place to prevent dropout, referrals to ABET centres or FET colleges, if there are any students currently on a waiting list for special needs schools, and if students on these lists are more likely to dropout.

Schools discussed several kinds of programs that were in place and aimed at increasing learner retention and the overall delivery of education. These programs primarily involved feeding schemes, extra classes, mentoring, extra-mural activities, transportation facilities, and increased parental involvement. Of these, feeding schemes and improved parental involvement appeared to be the more successful strategies.

Schools offering feeding schemes claimed to have had some success retaining their learners and improving the school conditions, as not only did learners have more energy but the feeding scheme acted as an incentive for learners to attend school. Increased parental involvement also appeared to be quite effective as it allowed schools to track their learners more efficiently, ensured learners would attend school, and meant that learners were doing their homework. A lack of or negative parental involvement were frequently reported as reasons contributing to why learners had dropped out of school.

“We run a feeding scheme for the learners who are disadvantaged and we also give support to our learners.”

“Schools should encourage the learners’ parents to be more involved attend more school meetings”
– Educator interviews

Whilst most of these intervention strategies may in fact help curb the high dropout rate at schools, no schools had programmes in place specifically tailored to address the problem of learners dropping out. In fact, many schools reported a lack of guidance from the GDE in terms of how to deal with this issue.

When dropouts were asked if they had any recommendations, most highlighted the lack of guidance from the school which could have been resolved by school counsellors or social workers. Furthermore, many learners indicated that they were unaware of what their alternatives were, and there appears to be negative connotations associated with ABET/FET colleges which prevents learners who drop out of school from pursuing these avenues. These colleges also tend to be quite saturated preventing learners from enrolling in them.

The same problem arises with special needs schools; while many school representatives indicated that there were learners on the waiting list for special needs schools, they also reported that some of these learners are more likely to drop out because these schools are too full and thus unable to

take the learners. Many school representatives stated that there was simply not enough support from the parents as well as the GDE in this regard.

“Yes some of these learners dropout because they do not get into Special Education.”

“We cannot refer the learners without their parents’ consent.”

In some schools, registers are used as instruments for accurate decision-making and analysis of learner performance. School Principals indicated that a team from the Administrative group, together with members of SAT, would go through the registers on a weekly basis and identify learners with absenteeism or other issues requiring attention.

No Consensus

From the above it is clear that those patterns identified by school representatives are incongruent with the information provided by dropouts. From the dropouts’ perspective there appears to be several school or system obstacles to obtaining a Matric Certificate. These obstacles are most prevalent in the Grade 10 and result in consecutive grade repetition, inability to handle the work specific to this grade, and older learners who either feel they are too old for school or who are told this by family members, peers, and educators.

The school representatives, however, do not appear aware of these factors, but rather associate learner drop out with social reasons emerging from the larger community such as poverty and unemployment. At the same time, whilst these reasons were not the most frequently reported amongst dropouts, they did still appear quite often. There appears to be several patterns surrounding learner dropout, some of which spawn from social issues. Whilst the school system is certainly a major contributing factor it is not the only one. Rather, a more systemic and holistic view of this phenomenon would provide for a more successful solution and intervention.

In Sum

Based on this information, it appears that the more prevalent issue facing learners in school appears to be an inability to progress through the education system at the desired pace. In order to better understand, predict, and prevent the problem from occurring, one needs to consider why so many learners repeat Grade 10 and what makes it such an insurmountable obstacle.

Furthermore, there seems to be a large disconnect between the perceptions of the teachers and the actual conditions in which learners drop out of school. Schools tend to deny any factors contributing to learners drop out from within the school, and thus do not address such issues.

Whilst many of the schools included in the sample claim to have prevention strategies in place, these are general, over-arching strategies that do not specifically attend to the problems affecting learner dropout. The success of these programs appears to be directly influenced by both parental support and support from the GDE. Most schools tend to function independently of the Department of Basic Education, and are either not aware of any guidelines stipulated in the policies set down by the GDE or are unable to follow them because they do not adequately address the issues at large.

Lastly, the alternatives in place (ABET/FET Colleges, other secondary schools or special needs institutions) appear to be insufficient; entrance requirements are, in some cases, too stringent and in others the distance from home makes it unaffordable. Finally, during our interviews with learners it was clear that ABET and FET Colleges carry a stigma for many of our youth.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Both the pushout practices and extrinsic factors identified in the study provide valuable opportunities for intervention by GDE. These system improvements can be effected at a policy level, at a district level and at a school level. Each of these levels has a key role to play in addressing the problem of learner drop out.

According to the project proposal and plan, recommendations were developed jointly with Khulisa by the same group of key stakeholders who met in February 2012 at project inception. At the “Recommendations Workshop” on 8 August 2012, Khulisa presented recommendations from schools which were discussed and some tentatively adopted.⁵⁴ Recommendations were then further discussed and refined at a follow-up project management meeting on 22 August 2012.

The table on the following page summarises the resulting recommendations.

⁵⁴ Recommendations from schools are summarised in tables in Annexure F. Recommendations from Project Management Team are summarised in Annexure G.

SUMMARY OF HIGH LEVEL RECOMMENDATIONS
<p>FOR LEARNERS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diagnostic assessment • Remedial training • Appeals mechanism for challenging abuses and oversights • Demystifying the assessment policy • A policy for teen parents • Knowledge Campaigns regarding dropout • Negotiations with transport service providers to enable learners to access additional learning opportunities
<p>FOR PARENTS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SMS communication system • Dropout awareness in parent booklet
<p>FOR EDUCATORS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explicit roles for those responsible for dropout • Certified training for SBST members to identify and assist learners at risk of dropping out • Career Guidance training for educators • Realistic view of parents as partners in education
<p>FOR TRACKING SYSTEMS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dropout Register • Uniform Transfer Cards • Learner Profiles • Period Attendance Registers • Links with other departmental databases for more efficient learner tracking y (e.g. DSD, HA, DoH) • Links with DSD Child support Grants to track learners
<p>FOR REFERRALS TO ABET AND FET</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which is appropriate and for whom? • Address negative perceptions
<p>FOR MONITORING AND EVALUATION</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ESSP's effectiveness in addressing dropout • LURITS as existing tracking system in tracking dropouts • Identify and follow up on schools where policy compliance is poor
<p>FOR EXISTING POLICIES AND GUIDELINES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grade 8-10-12 enrolment ratios must be included as measure of school performance • Dropout needs to be clearly defined in the Learner Attendance policy • Clear guidance needs to be provided as to how schools should deal with reregistration • The practice of issuing condoned passes and progressing learners through the system based on this Policy needs to be reconsidered • There is a need for a clear Policy Statement on pushout with explicit consequences for principals and educators • Options at FET Colleges need to be better communicated, and schools need to be assisted in communicating bursary opportunities to suitable learners which requires clear collaboration with the DHET. • Investigate the legal definition of "Parents" according to SA Schools Act and allow for a wider definition at schools

Table 6: Joint recommendations for systems improvements

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Changes to Existing Policies and Guidelines

The Policy on Learner Attendance indicates the acceptable reasons for absence, the duties to maintain accurate attendance records, when a learner can be deregistered and procedures to follow for deregistration.

This policy is not being applied consistently across schools and there is little evidence that districts are being informed when a learner is deregistered from the school. The school visits shows that attendance records are not accurately maintained by most schools. The requirement to deregister within 10 days and to inform the district should be reconsidered as schools continue to retain learners on their records beyond 10 days and are not informing the district.

This also indicates that dropout needs to be clearly defined in the Learner Attendance policy, and how to distinguish these from those learners who have left the school, whether to attend an FET College, an ABET Centre or to move to another school. This lack of a clear definition and poor tracking system results in a situation where true dropouts (those not studying or engaging in any productive activity) are considerably overestimated. Consideration should be given to collecting information to enable careful analysis and inform strategies to address dropout at school and community level.

The obligation to reregister learners is also being applied on an *ad hoc* basis. Some learners are refused readmission to the school as too much work has been missed and concern about the possible negative implication for poor school matriculation results. Clear guidance needs to be provided as to how schools should deal with reregistration.

While there is some relationship between consistent absenteeism and eventual dropout, the issue of dropout is currently not dealt with explicitly in the policy. Thus, schools continue to use their own discretion as to how dropout should be handled which, in some instances, is to ignore the issue. Clear guidelines within this same policy that outline structures that should exist within the school to address dropout as a distinct issue, which originates from both academic and social reasons needs to be clarified. If this issue is to be taken on by existing structures, such as the School Assessment Team or the School Based Support Team, this mandate needs to be explicitly given. Similarly, consideration should be given as to giving Grade Heads this responsibility.

The National Policy Pertaining to The Programme and Promotion Requirements of the National Curriculum Statement stipulates that no learner is to be retained in any one phase for a period exceeding four years. The practice of issuing condoned passes and progressing learners through the system based on this Policy needs to be reconsidered. It is clear that learners who are not coping progress through the system until FET Phase. These learners then repeat the same grade multiple times, becoming discouraged and become quiet dropouts.

The current process of taking disputes on results to districts for mediation should be reviewed. Dropouts report that schools do not follow this process and disputes have remained unresolved.

Closer management of the moderation process needs to be considered, particularly in schools with high levels of repetition, ensuring that learners do not drop out due to incorrect marks. Calculating marks incorrectly has also been a vehicle for pushout and consideration should be given as to how this can be dealt with.

The National Protocol for Assessment (Grades R-12) issued by the Department of Basic Education clearly outlines the conditions of assessment, obligations to provide feedback to parents or guardians and the procedure for issuing report cards. Despite this, a dropout reported being denied his report card due to unpaid R200 school fees in Ekurhuleni. The current directive not to retain any learner more than once per phase has resulted in a situation where learners are condoned through the system and reach the FET Phase unable to cope. The practice of condoned passes needs to be reviewed to address this, as well as resources directed at enhancing teaching of literacy and numeracy in Foundation Phase.

Policy Statement on Pushout

The study confirms that many learners feel forced to leave and the reasons provided suggest that pushout is taking place. Similarly, the dropout interviews confirm many experiences of pushout. There is a need for a clear Policy Statement on pushout with explicit consequences for principals and educators. The efficacy of such Policy Statement will be considerably influenced by how school performance is measured. The emphasis for schools on the Matric Pass Rates as the key performance indicator has created perverse incentives encouraging schools to reduce the numbers of learners taking the senior certificate examination to those the school thinks will pass. Similarly, we identified practices where schools insisted learners write their examination as private candidates so that their results are not included in the school statistics. Alternative measures for managing and monitoring school performance need to be actively explored. These can, include, but are not limited to measuring and managing schools based on levels of progression (ratios of Grade 8, 10 and 12 learners), learner repetition and learner attrition.

Revisions to Curriculum

Career Guidance needs to receive greater attention prior to learners entering the FET Phase. This should include the kinds of subjects that learners require for specific career options, enabling learners to ensure their subject choices meet their requirements for further study, or to change to a school which offers the necessary subject choices prior to entering the FET Phase. This also includes language streams, and language of learning and teaching in schools. The requirement to pass first language means it is crucial that learners can take a first language they are comfortable in. Where this is not possible, schools need to refer these learners to appropriate alternatives and not to force them to take a language they are not competent in, resulting in eventual dropout.

One option to consider is placement tests, allowing schools to identify and fill gaps new learners might have when entering the school.

FET Turnaround Strategy

The FET Turnaround Strategy represents a commitment by the Department of Higher Education and Training to improve the functionality of these colleges. Currently the split in management between the DBE and DHET means that information about options at FET Colleges is poorly communicated, parents and learners regard it as an inferior learning pathway and school representatives report that weaker learners would prefer to remain in the public ordinary schooling system than move to an FET College where they have greater prognosis of success.

Options at FET Colleges need to be better communicated, and schools need to be assisted in communicating bursary opportunities to suitable learners. This requires clear collaboration with the DHET.

CONCLUSIONS

The Member of the Executive Council for Education, Ms. Barbara Creecy, asked the following questions in her address to the GDE's Dropout Colloquium in 2012:⁵⁵ Our responses are below the questions.

Who are the 40% of learners who “vanished” from the system in the Grade 10 2010 cohort? Where did they go? Why?

Many of the dropouts interviewed were either engaged in schooling (another public or private school, FET College or ABET or working. However, the “true” dropouts are not engaged in productive activities and were very despondent.

Are more African learners staying in school?

Probably. Certainly the majority of learners interviewed in this group were African. However, the sense is that race was less important than class. The individuals interviewed and the potential dropouts surveyed among current learners showed poor social cohesion, lack of parental/family support and schools that were not able to fill those gaps.

What is the definition of “dropout?”

Learner dropout is regarded as any learner leaving the public ordinary school system prior to completing grade 12, irrespective of whether this occurs during or at the end of the academic year. However, it is not clear what the definition is in non-compulsory post GET phase.

What are the curricular aspects to the phenomenon?

We found that more than half of the dropouts interviewed left their school due to pushout. A key incentive for school management and teachers to encourage learners to leave is to bolster matriculation results. The curriculum does not need to be adapted as such, but the system needs to serve these learners better through placement examinations, remedial work and incorporating Grade 8 to 10 to 12 ratios when looking secondary school quality.

How can key role-players arrive at a common understanding of the nature, diagnosis and impact of dropout?

The findings of this report will be presented at a Recommendations Workshop on August 8 which is a starting point for engaging with recommendations emanating from the schools and the findings. We believe that some of the recommendations will be easy to implement.

⁵⁵ Creecy Keynote Address at Learner Dropout Colloquium, 9 March 2012

How can meaningful prevention programmes be identified?

It appears that repeating a grade is one of the key predictors of dropout. Other elements include a means to appeal incorrect marks. Finally, laying out the steps or process for schools on how to speak to a child's guardian or parent must be tightened and improved as many of these vulnerable learners lack involved parents.

What would a 'predictability model' or early warning system look like (based on historical data: attendance, achievement, behaviour, age)?

First identify schools that have a dropout problem through poor throughput of learners (enrolment pyramids); second implement rigorous tracking systems; third implement testing and appropriate placement to ensure learners are supported appropriately.

What pathways to completing formal schooling can be provided for dropouts (e.g. upgrading ABET and FET options, and getting the involvement of business)?

Both ABET and FET Colleges are unattractive to this age cohort. Many of them feel that there is stigma attached to attending these institutions. There are barriers to entry related both to cost and distance.

There were no recommendations made by schools about what to do to prevent pushout. This is because none of the respondents explicitly brought up this practice in interviews. Some made vague references to other schools needing to give learners "second chances."