

Right of Reply

Basic Education on the Rise

Contrary to the orchestrated narrative, South African basic education is a system on the rise with no teacher shortages, writes Angie Motshekga.

In his article titled “Teacher Shortage Creating a Reading and Classroom Crisis,” published on 6 October 2023 in the Sowetan, Mmusi Maimane appears to misdiagnose the state of basic education in South Africa. While I appreciate Maimane’s passion for education, unfortunately, he relies on dated statistics erroneously published by [BusinessTech](#) on 7 April 2021. This situation brings to mind a seminal quote by American politician and Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who declared a universal truth: “You are entitled to your opinion, but not to your facts.”

Let me clarify the situation regarding the article by BusinessTech.co.za, which inaccurately claimed a shortage of 24,000 teachers. It seems the reporter misunderstood my response during a parliamentary Q&A session. In that session, Chantel King, a Democratic Alliance Member of Parliament, asked about the national teacher vacancy rate and the breakdown of vacancies in each province. As of February 2021, I stated that the vacancy rate stood at 5.8%. This figure represents actual vacancies in schools relative to the allocated posts for 2021. Additionally, I pointed out that Provincial Education Departments were actively reallocating surplus teachers from schools with extra staff to those with teacher shortages. This proactive approach ensured that the actual number of vacancies was lower than initially reported.

Fast forward to 2023, Maimane utilises these erroneously presented statistics to critique the state of basic education, and the newspaper publishes them without verification. In his article, Maimane emphasises the purported teacher shortage and the alleged issue of overcrowded classrooms. Within his piece, he includes an unattributed statement claiming that recent statistics indicate that over 50% of primary school pupils in South Africa find themselves in classes with more than 40 students. As I pen this response, I am still scratching my head, trying to ascertain the source of these statistics. However, this assertion is, in fact, inaccurate.

In a recent article of mine, which was published on the [Polity](#) website and SAnews, I highlighted two critical facts. Our current learner-educator ratio (LER) is 29.8 students per teacher. Additionally, we employ approximately 405,000 educators within the public sector. Contrary to the notion of a shortage, the truth is that, as a country, we currently have a surplus of teaching personnel, attributed mainly to the remarkable success of the Funza Lushaka Bursary Programme, which focuses on teacher training. This programme is one of the most successful ANC-led government training initiatives. The Bursary Programme has played a pivotal role in facilitating the training and integration of new educators into our educational system. Commencing in 2007, which marked the year when bursary recipients completed their studies and became eligible for placement in 2008, up until the most recent data available for 2023, a cumulative total of 52,099 teachers have successfully completed their training through the Funza Lushaka programme. Impressively, 82% of these teachers are already placed in substantive teaching positions.

Furthermore, Maimane criticises the alleged lower salaries paid to our teaching cohort. The matter of teacher salaries in South Africa, however, is multifaceted. While there have been some improvements in recent years, there is still room for further progress. According to Stellenbosch University's Research on Socio-Economic Policy ([RESEP](#)), the average government teacher earned R42,688 per month in salary and benefits in 2019 – putting the average teacher in the top 5% of income distribution in South Africa. While this figure is lower than the average salary for teachers in many other developed countries, such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia. Nonetheless, it surpasses the average salary for teachers in most other Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries.

Finally, he bemoans a bane of our existence: lower-than-average reading comprehension among primary school children. Our education system is fragile in this regard, as learners have not yet benefited from many years of schooling, and this fragility has been exacerbated by the global disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. It does not amount to a scandal, though. Like many countries, the COVID-19 pandemic reversed some of our gains. Since then, we have instituted a recovery plan already bearing results.

For instance, with our partners, Zenex Foundation, we recently launched the most ambitious Indigenous language reading programmes, christened [Ulwazi Lwethu](#) Reading Materials. This programme will not only be a homage to the deep-rooted histories and narratives that define our society but also the fertile ground where young minds can grow with a reinforced sense of identity and self-worth. Our vision for the future strongly promotes the use of African languages as the bedrock for literacy development in South Africa. This initiative comes hot on the heels of unleashing a 'One Million [Storybooks](#) Project' in collaboration with the National Education Collaboration Trust (NECT), a welcome step towards improving reading comprehension among our children. Getting children to read for pleasure from a young age is crucial, as this will help them develop the skills they need to succeed in school and life. One critical aspect that cannot be overlooked is the importance of adult reading. Adults serve as mediators in children's reading experiences. Hence, we do not face a crisis in children's reading in the country but rather a national reading imbroglio. Unless we unite as a nation, this battle may only be won after the critical 2030 timeline set by the National Development Plan (NDP).

However, the response from iconic private sector brands such as Sanlam, AVBOB, and many others to support reading and learning improvement initiatives has been heartwarming. In line with the NDP's guidance, "partnerships in education can help improve the quality of basic education, increase access to education, and improve learner outcomes." Meanwhile, we are rolling our sleeves and diligently implementing the Revised National Reading Sector [Strategy](#) (2024-2030). We appeal to Maimane to work with us, with a caveat to use data from reputable research institutions and information freely available from our Department of Basic Education experts. Contrary to the narrative of a department in crisis, we are a system on the rise.

1. <https://businesstech.co.za/news/government/481485/south-africa-has-a-shortage-of-over-24000-teachers/>
2. <https://www.polity.org.za/article/teacher-supply-and-demand-by-2030-securing-sas-future-2023-10-13/searchString:angie+motshekga>
3. <https://businesstech.co.za/news/government/647819/how-much-money-teachers-really-earn-in-south-africa/>

4. <https://mpumalanganews.co.za/414662/minister-of-basic-education-angie-motshekga-launch-the-one-million-storybooks-project-in-mpumalanga/>
5. <https://www.zenexfoundation.org.za/ulwazi-lwethu-african-language-reading-resources-cultivating-a-new-era-for-literacy/news-article/>
6. <https://www.iol.co.za/saturday-star/news/dbe-develops-national-reading-sector-strategy-to-improve-sas-literacy-levels-e234236d-1b00-4294-be7e-a8b74e9a8035#:~:text=A%20three%2Dday%20facilitated%20process,for%20meanin g%20at%20age%2010.>