

NATIONAL ASSEMBLY

WRITTEN REPLY

QUESTION 1025.

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1025. Mr V Zungula (ATM) to ask the Minister of Basic Education: to ask the Minister of Basic Education:

Given the statistics by the Council on Higher Education that 60% of learners who entered Grade 1 wrote Matric and that only 12% went to university, factoring in that in numbers the 40% deficit amounts to 3,2 million children between the ages of 15 to 24 who are not in school, employment and/or any skills-based training opportunities, (a) how does her department intend to reduce the 40% gap between the learners who enrolled in Grade 1 versus those who wrote their Matric finals and (b) what has her department found to be the cause of the dropouts?

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Response

(1) Given the statistics by the Council on Higher Education that 60% of learners who entered Grade 1 wrote Matric and that only 12% went to university, factoring in that in numbers the 40% deficit amounts to 3,2 million children between the ages of 15 to 24 who are not in school, employment and/or any skills-based training opportunities, (a) how does her department intend to reduce the 40% gap between the learners who enrolled in Grade 1 versus those who wrote their Matric finals and (b) what has her department found to be the cause of the dropouts?

Before answering the questions, it is first important to note a few problems with the statistics referenced in the preamble to the question. The statistics referenced by the Council on Higher Education are taken from a 2016 research report, which was based on data analysis of the 2008 matric cohort (Van Broekhuizen, H.; S. Van Der Berg & H. Hofmeyr (2016) 'Higher Education Access and Outcomes for the 2008 National Matric Cohort' in Stellenbosch Economic Working Papers: 16/16;). So this analysis was based on the situation for the 2008 matrics. Given the significant progress since 2008, the numbers are quite outdated. For example, the number of NSC bachelor passes produced annually has nearly tripled since 2008 (just over 100 000 in 2008 compared to nearly 300 000 in 2022). Therefore, the statistics referenced are outdated and overstate the extent of the current problem given consistent reductions in dropout since 2008, and increases in university entrance qualifications.

Nevertheless, the department is still concerned about the ongoing problem of learners exiting the education system without attaining a National Senior Certificate or an equivalent qualification.

The Department's mission to ensure that children attend school during compulsory schooling age, and increase the percentage of youths, who complete Grade 12 is critical. The Department has implemented various activities and initiatives to advance this mission, resulting in a decline in dropouts before completing the National Senior Certificate, and almost 100% schooling amongst children at compulsory ages; although the pandemic caused some setbacks. Successful completion of twelve years of schooling in South Africa is similar to other middle-income countries, as detailed in the Department's annual reports.

Understanding why youths drop out, is essential to promoting successful completion of schooling. Research shows that those who struggle with their studies and facing poverty at home, are the most likely to drop out. The 2019 General Household Survey revealed that 34% of youths aged 16 to 18 were not coping academically, and 25% indicated "no money for fees." Coping academically is a significant factor in

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parents and guardians' decision not to invest in a child who is not performing well. (Refer to the Department's General Household Survey (GHS): Focus on Schooling publications.)

To increase "survival" to Grade 12, the government's strategies are multi-pronged, focusing on mitigating poverty's effects and improving learning and teaching in the classroom. The following key initiatives contributed to past reductions in dropouts and are likely drivers of future improvements in this regard:

1a) Efforts to reduce learner dropout

- The **National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP)**. This intervention encourages children to attend school, and promotes learning by reducing levels of hunger and malnutrition, which inhibit successful learning.
- **No fee schools**. This longstanding intervention ensures that children and youths in poorer communities are not prevented from attending school due to the inability of the household to pay for school fees.
- Policies on **teenage pregnancies**. Government Notice 704 of 2021 formalised policy on the protection of the schooling of pregnant learners. Among females aged 16 to 18, around 10% did not attend school due to pregnancy, according to the 2019 GHS.
- Ongoing strengthening of the **Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS)**. A more focussed curriculum is one reason that has been put forward as a reason for past improvements in South Africa's performance in international testing programmes – see the Department's *Action Plan to 2024*.
- Efforts aimed at **improving learning in the early grades**. A key government priority is improving reading, and learning and teaching in general, in the early grades. Several interventions contribute towards this, including the shift in the responsibility for pre-schooling from the social development sector to basic education, the Early Grade Reading Study and associated teacher development innovations, and the introduction of the Systemic Evaluation.
- Special **examination preparation support for Grade 12 learners**. Activities here, aimed largely at ensuring that learners leave school with the NSC, include the so-called winter schools.
- The expansion of the **learner-level enrolment and attendance monitoring systems**. The Learner Unit Record Information and Tracking System (LURITS), the SA-SAMS school management system and the

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partnership-driven Data Driven Districts (DDD) initiative have all contributed to a more robust approach to monitoring exactly where in the country dropping out is occurring. These systems proved invaluable for providing information on, for instance, where children were not returning to school during the pandemic.

1b) Causes of dropout

In South Africa, the problem of learner dropout is complex and multifaceted. However, research has shown that the fundamental underlying cause of dropping out is weak learning foundations. Academic difficulties, poor school resources and facilities, weak teaching and school management, and access to schools in the context of mobility, are some of the risk factors highlighted in a 2007 Ministerial Report on learner retention. The socio-emotional issues among learners were also identified as a risk factor for dropping out. Females are less likely to drop out of school, than males; despite facing certain risk factors that affect females in particular, like pregnancy.

According to the General Household Survey (GHS), the main reasons for learners not attending educational institutions are household poverty and income shocks, household labour and family responsibilities, migration, and health problems. However, it is important to interpret these reasons in the light of research showing that weak early learning outcomes are the main predictor of dropping out. The GHS results showed that "other" reasons, not listed in the questionnaire, were the main reasons given for 7-15 year-olds not attending school, which could be a comfortable response option given the sensitive nature of disclosing some of the reasons for dropping out.

Grade repetition is another factor that could contribute to dropout rates, but its impact is uncertain. Repetition discourages children about their educational prospects and makes them relatively old for their grade, which could make opting out of school more socially or economically attractive. However, grade repetition could have a positive impact on educational outcomes if it is accompanied by effective remedial support. Despite the uncertainty around the impact of grade repetition on dropout, it should primarily be understood as a symptom of weak learning rather than as a cause of educational problems such as dropout. High rates of grade repetition lead to education system inefficiencies such as higher class sizes and more "person-years" of public spending on education to achieve the same outcomes.

Overall, the reasons for learner dropout in South Africa are interlinked, and dropping out is often understood as a series of circumstances rather than an isolated event. While poverty, household responsibilities, and other external factors can trigger dropping out, weak early learning outcomes remain the major underlying vulnerability

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to dropping out. Improving the quality of education in the earlier grades, addressing academic difficulties, and strengthening teaching and school management are crucial steps to reduce dropout rates and improve educational outcomes in South Africa.