

Evolution of SA's Basic Education Landscape

Our schooling sector has demonstrated resilience amidst financial and health challenges and achieved qualitative improvements while expanding its reach, writes Angie Motshekga

Over the past decade, the National Senior Certificate (NSC) pass rate has consistently risen from 60% in 2009 to over 80% in recent years. The Class of 2023 deserves praise for upholding this positive trend, achieving an 82.9% pass rate. This not only marks a 2.8% increase from 2022's 80.1% but also a significant 6.5% rise from 2021's 76.4%. With 572,983 candidates passing the 2023 NSC exams, this year's results are the second highest in the history of the NSC, highlighting the sustained commitment to educational excellence.

The year 2009 marked only the second year of the revamped National Senior Certificate (NSC) exams, introduced in 2008, which initially led to a significant drop in successful Grade 12 passes, casting doubt on the ability to maintain the pre-2008 upward trend. At that time, there was no indication of learning outcome improvements below Grade 12, as evidenced by South Africa's participation in three international assessments: the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) for Grade 9, the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) for Grades 4 and 5, and the Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) for Grade 6. The 2009 global financial crisis, the worst economic downturn since 1992, also threatened investment in the growing schooling system due to negative economic growth.

Despite initial pessimism, South Africa's resilient spirit and government commitment to education have yielded progress, with challenges remaining but successes celebrated and weaknesses tackled for a brighter national future.

2012 marked a turning point: 2011 TIMSS results showed significant [improvements](#) in mathematics and science, signalling better learning and paving the way for future NSC gains.

The upward trend in NSC achievements from 2009 to 2020 is evident, with passes [increasing](#) from 335,000 to 441,000, marking a 32% jump. NSCs with a Bachelor's endorsement grew even more rapidly. Including similar qualifications, the rate of South African youths completing twelve years of education climbed from 47% to 59%, smoothing the transition from school to further life stages for many.

A further improvement has been emphasising practical and not purely theoretical subjects. These can assist youths in being better prepared for the post-school world. Between 2011 and 2022, the number of schools offering, in Grade 12, one of the 24 non-language subjects that include a practical assessment task (PAT) increased from 3 452 to 4 028, with total schools with Grade 12 being around 6,000.

The fact underlying the Grade 12 success trends was an [improvement at the lower grades](#) in the fundamentals of language and mathematics, confirmed through SACMEQ 2013, PIRLS 2011 and 2016, and TIMSS 2015 and 2019.

Driving these educational improvements were enhanced teaching strategies, supported by several key factors: pupils starting Grade 1 with more pre-schooling; the introduction of the clear Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) between 2012 and 2014; a focused effort on early mastery of basics; improved classroom material access; and more teachers, notably younger ones, with university training. This progress builds on the foundation laid by predecessors, notably Minister Naledi Pandor.

For some years, the spending situation was relatively healthy. It was possible to improve the purchasing power of publicly employed educators continuously, with the increase between 2007 and 2018 being a whole [37%](#). At the same time, spending on non-personnel recurrent items for schools, a critical budget line as this represents the tools teachers need to do their work, also improved, in part due to a significant adjustment in 2013, which raised spending targets for quintiles 2 and 3 schools to match those of the poorest quintile, which is quintile 1.

A real decline in infrastructure spending by provincial education departments starting in 2017, after over a decade of spending improvements, marked the beginning of a worsening budget squeeze primarily caused by slow economic growth. Compounding the problem was an [increasing school-age population](#) to which services had to be provided. Average class sizes increased, and while the TIMSS 2019 Grade 9 results reflected a continuing improvement, there was no improvement in TIMSS Grade 5 for that year.

The pandemic, beginning in 2020, added an additional layer of challenges, including the tragic loss of some 3,500 publicly employed educators. However, decisive action by the ANC-led government helped limit the harmful impacts on learning. It is estimated that the early prioritisation of teachers in the vaccination programme saved the lives of [870 educators](#). The Presidential Youth Employment Initiative (PYEI) not only softened the economic blow for youths, but the introduction of young school assistants facilitated the functioning of schools at a difficult time.

Promotion rules for grades 10 and 11 were adjusted to ensure that grade repetition did not unduly rise due to the pandemic-related school disruptions. This had the unintended consequence of pushing repetition down to levels even lower than before the pandemic. In hindsight, this was a good thing, and questions whether we had been too stringent before the pandemic with regard to promotion. The number of Grade 12 candidates soared in 2021.

After considering demographic factors, the number of NSCs obtained in 2022 was 21% higher than one might have predicted before the pandemic. All this has taken the percentage of youths with Grade 12, or something equivalent, to 62%, according to Statistics South Africa Household Data.

Contrary to the view that the COVID-19 pandemic erased a decade of progress, the enhanced teaching skills and significant learning advancements remain intact, underpinning our efforts to ensure schools remain pivotal in driving a more equitable and prosperous South Africa. Therefore, it is nonsensical to determine the real matric pass rate by merely examining the number of Grade 1 pupils 11 years before Grade 12 achievement. This approach smacks of intellectual laziness and is academic thuggery.

Motshekga is the longest-serving Basic Education Minister in South Africa.