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EDUCATIONAL ACCESS IN SOUTH AFRICA

COUNTRY POLICY BRIEF

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This Policy Brief describes and explains patterns of access to schools in South Africa. It outlines policy and legislation on access to education and provides a statistical analysis of access, vulnerability and exclusion. It is based on findings from the Country Analytic Review on Educational Access in South Africa (Motala et al, 2007) which can be found on the CREATE website.

Why educational access is important in South Africa

South Africa's Commitment to the Millennium Development Goals is premised on the right to basic education enshrined in the South African Constitution (Section 29(1)). The South African Schools Act of 1996 makes it compulsory for all children to attend school until they reach the age of 15 or the end of Grade 9. Compared to many developing countries there is near universal access to formal public schooling up to the end of the compulsory phase. Some estimates place Gross Enrolment Rates as high as 99% in primary grades and 87% in secondary. Spot checks suggest that although high, the real rates may be 5-10% lower, and late entry and over age enrolment remain significant issues. The Gross enrolment ratio in 2005 for the primary phase was 103 and for the secondary phase 89. In the same year, the gender parity index for SA was 1.13.

These high levels of access do not guarantee that learners have equal opportunities to experience quality education. Meaningful access (regular attendance, appropriate achievement, progress on schedule, successful completion) is yet to be achieved for many. Studies suggest that despite spending more per child relatively and absolutely than most African countries, learners perform poorly on basic literacy and numeracy tests.

Despite important gains in equalising public spending per child, the apartheid legacy of racial inequality casts shadows over educational access and outcomes.

Although most learners enrol and complete primary education, late entry is not uncommon and significant numbers of learners are overage. Repetition persists although legislation has reduced its incidence. Interrupted schooling often related to internal migration is also not uncommon. Demand for schooling remains high despite numerous barriers to success and the poor quality of outcomes for many. Withdrawing children from basic education appears to be a measure of the last resort – even in the context of HIV and AIDS. Silent exclusion (attendance without meaningful learning and achievement) is concealed by high enrolment figures.

For all these reasons, access remains a key issue in South Africa despite high enrolment rates. Access remains very unequal in terms of quality, inefficient in terms of learning outcomes, and still shaped strongly by the apartheid legacy.

The South African policy context

In South Africa, education is compulsory from grades 1 to 9 (ages 6 to 15). This period of basic education covers seven years of primary school

and two years in lower secondary school. The final three years of secondary school are not compulsory, but government is obliged to make this progressively available. The reception year, Grade R (for children aged 4 turning 5) is being implemented and the target is to reach full coverage of Grade R by 2010. Pro-poor capitation for non-salary costs, social grant subsidies, school fee exemptions and fee-free schools assist learners into classes.

Responsibility for schooling is shared between national and provincial government. The national Department of Education develops national norms and standards and creates the main policy and legislative frameworks. The nine provincial departments of education are responsible for enacting policy at school level and making funding decisions. Provision of schooling is mainly public, with independent schools accommodating less than 4% of learners in Grades 1 to 9 in 2004.

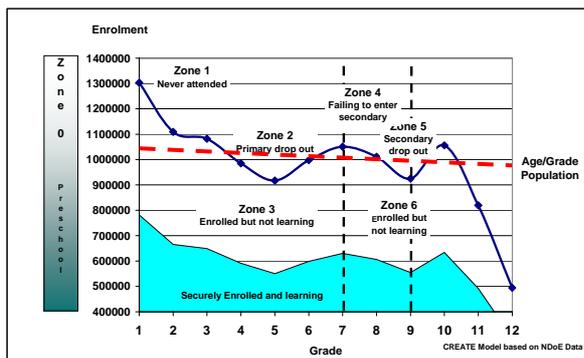


Figure 1: Zones of Exclusion in South Africa

Post-apartheid education policy guarantees the fundamental right of all citizens to education, equity, redress, and the improvement of quality. New policies since 1994 have been designed to create a more inclusive and efficient system. Special attention has been given to ensuring access of marginalised learners, children infected with HIV and AIDS, and learners with special educational needs. Policy has aimed to create a more efficient system by regulating repetition and applying age-grade norms in order to minimize under-age and over-age learners.

Patterns of educational access in South Africa

Access to basic education in South Africa is expansive when compared with other developing countries:

Age-specific school enrolment rates for 7 to 15 year olds in South Africa stood at over 98.4% in 2005. However, many remain over age for their grade and attendance is known to be problematic in areas.

It is suspected that significant numbers of migrants may not be counted in official data.

Out of School Children. Estimates differ – the Department of Education calculates that about 300,000 children are out of school, whereas Shindler and Fleisch (2007) put the number at about 670,000. Children are more likely to be out of school in rural provinces and in some townships, and to be older rather than younger.

Primary schooling: Almost all school-age children enrol in schools, with just under 2% of learners never entering a public school. Most learners stay in school through to the end of primary, with 88.6% completing Grade 7 in 2005. Repetition and drop-out are both calculated to reach an average of 4% in primary schooling, but these may be under-estimates.

Overage enrolment: Lower Net Enrolment Rates – 87.4% for primary schools in 2004 – suggest that learners are not in the correct grade for their age. They are most likely to be over-age except in grade 1 where some may be underage as well.

Secondary schooling: 2004 data shows that 90% of learners moved from Grade 7 to Grade 8 for the last two years of compulsory education. Data suggests that there has been significant improvement in the completion rate of compulsory basic education between 1997 and 2003, with an increase from 78% in 1997 to 92% in 2003, although this is not age sensitive data.

Many children remain **at risk of dropping out** from primary and secondary schooling. Factors include: poverty, orphanhood, school quality and school context including safety; and the impact of HIV and AIDS. At-risk indicators include: erratic attendance, overage enrolment, repetition and poverty.

21.2% of the appropriate population received an old age pension, and 10.6% of disabled persons received a disability grant in 2007.

64.5% of children aged 0-6 years received a child support grant and 1.6% also received a care dependence grant and 0.2% received a foster care grant in 2007.

7% of children are always or often hungry and just over 17% of children are sometimes hungry.

Orphans in South Africa	
0-5 years	9%
6-12 years	20%
13-17 years	28%

Community Survey 2007, StatsSA

49% of these orphans are AIDS orphans. In 2003, 17.4% of children had lost one parent and 3% of children had lost both parents (an estimated 371,000 children).

Children who are **silently excluded** are difficult to quantify, but may include a majority of learners in some schools.

In the national Department of Education systemic evaluation of Grade 6 in 2005, learners obtained a national mean score of 38% in Language of Learning and Teaching, 27% in Mathematics, and 41% in Natural Sciences. Levels of achievement are widely regarded as disappointing with a large number failing to reach minimum national standards.

The causes of exclusion

South Africa's enrolment rate is high even for households which experience economic or social stress. There is little evidence in the South African context that child labour disrupts enrolment in school (it may nonetheless have an impact on performance) although it affects significant numbers in some locations. Neither is there a clear Cinderella effect on the schooling of fostered children. Fostered children are just as likely as the blood-related children of a household to be in school, although they are more likely to be overage. HIV and AIDS seem to have a greater impact on the school attendance of older teenagers rather than younger children. School-going is widely valued in South Africa and may contribute to social stability in households in times of crisis.

Chronic poverty appears to be the most important reason for learners being out of school. The depth of poverty – in terms of material deprivation, social isolation and their psychological consequences – distinguish children who are not in school from their peers in some poor communities. Although over 40% of schools are now fee free, other costs – transport, school uniforms, books and stationery,

examinations, and opportunity costs for older children – add additional burdens to already-stretched household budgets.

Among the costs of schooling, transport expenses are the single greatest impediment to educational access for those who do not walk to school.

Cash transfers to poor families, such as the Child Support Grant, appear to have had a positive effect on enrolment, especially in ensuring more learners begin Grade 1 at the appropriate age.

The impact of the HIV and AIDS pandemic affects both supply (because teachers are affected) and demand for education. HIV prevalence amongst children aged 2 to 18 years was 4.9% in 2005. The safety nets provided by extended families and community networks, as well as the potential support given by schools, may prove crucial in enabling affected children to stay in school.

Schools themselves play a big role in encouraging or discouraging access. Many learners do not have meaningful access to quality education.

Learners in Foundation Phase classes are unable to read and write adequately, and their educators are unable to adequately teach them how to do so.

Educators spend too little time at school, and, when at school spend too much time on administrative tasks.

Racism, sexism, bullying and xenophobia contribute to unwelcoming conditions in schools. Given apartheid's legacy, the problem of racial integration in schools has received a great deal of attention – multi-racial schools remain in the minority. Schools are no longer allowed to discriminate on the basis of race. Nevertheless, a number of exclusionary devices have limited access to better resourced ex whites-only schools: their geographic location far from where most black learners live; their high fees; and their often unwelcoming cultural ethos. Racially based polarisation of schools may have diminished but remains a conspicuous characteristic of the system.

The gender of learners has an impact on educational access and performance. As in other parts of Southern Africa there are more girls than boys in the system from Grades 6 to 12, and girls are much less likely than boys to drop out at higher levels. Nevertheless patriarchal attitudes and behaviour towards schoolgirls is a matter of serious concern, with girls encountering abuse,

harassment and assault by male classmates and educators. Pregnancy is also an important factor in girls dropping out.

Individual learners' and parents' assessment of the relevance of education is a key motivating influence in continued attendance at school.

After cost, the most important reason why learners remain out of school is their perception that it is useless or uninteresting: a school survey in 2004 revealed that almost 10% of learners overall, and more boys than girls (13.5% as against 6.5%), hold this view of the value of education.

Poor performance may be a result of learning disabilities, although the extent of this is unknown. However, surprising numbers of children – over 20% in some studies – are stunted, which is likely to adversely affect access and achievement. While policy emphasises mainstreaming children with learning barriers into ordinary schools, no additional financing has been allocated to support this, so children with learning disabilities often receive no special support.

Parents and guardians are not always able to provide the necessary background and knowledge of schooling to support their children, and many households are fractured. This may be one reason why many learners fail, repeat and drop out. Correlations between mothers' and children's educational levels are really only significant if mothers have been substantially schooled with little variation below completed secondary level. Not unexpectedly, more educated parents are more likely to encourage learning and to send their children to higher performing schools.

Some research suggests for many the rate of return on additional years of schooling remains flat until Grade 12 with there being little advantage to remaining in school unless it leads to higher education. The economic rewards for completing grade 7 or even grade 9 appear small and this may influence the choices of older learners.

Policy focus and research gaps

The Country Analytic Review for South Africa highlights the need for research on:

- More reliable statistical data providing disaggregated pictures of access including by race and across different Zones of Exclusion.
- More nuanced understandings of the particular mix of factors that lead different

groups of learners to progress slowly and drop out of school before completion.

- Better understandings of the school and classroom contexts of meaningful access, including the impact of learner and teacher absenteeism on time on task, and more unpacking of the nature and extent of silent exclusion.
- The impact of the introduction of grade R on different socio-economic groups and on subsequent enrolment at the right age and progression.
- The effects of fee-free school policy and pro-poor financing on access.
- Educational access in relation to particular sub groups including children with special needs, orphans, those in IDS-affected households.
- The special circumstances of internal and cross border migrants.

Research into these areas would further enhance policy initiatives to improve educational access.

This policy brief is based on:

Motala, S., Dieltiens, V., Carrim, N., Kgobe, P., Moyo, G. and Rembe, S. (2007). *Educational Access in South Africa: Country Analytic Review*. Available at www.create-rpc.org.

It has been developed by the authors and the CREATE team.



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CREATE in South Africa is currently working on community / school studies as well as thematic reviews on a range of issues relevant to access.