

School pass rates: are we getting it right?

By [Matsoso Tsoaeli](#)

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Education departments' districts and schools have been organising camps for Grade 12 learners to receive extra tuition and support in studying for their matric finals. Schools without boarding facilities even convert some of their classrooms into dormitories, because learners are expected to study into the night.



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These extreme measures are being resorted to because school and education authorities want to obtain a better pass rate than in the past. The government is on record as saying that it wants to achieve an 80% Grade 12 pass rate. Thus, schools, districts and provincial departments of education are competing to produce a higher pass rate, because this makes them and government look good.

But is this a realistic and sustainable target in the long run? The answer to this question is an emphatic "No!" It is a wrong and misguided target, because it does not take us anywhere as a country.

Linking education goals to the broader economic needs of the country

There is nothing tangible and significant to be got from such a target. Grade 12 examinations should be meaningful, adequate and progressive in terms of demonstrating the kind of skills that our children should have amassed upon completion of their schooling. We need to know how these examinations assist us in relation to the challenges and goals of growing the number of Black and Coloured professionals in South Africa.

It was disheartening to hear on 15 September the Chief Statistician lamenting the slow and insignificant growth pace of the numbers of Black and Coloured professionals during the last twenty years (1994-2014). For example, Stats SA reported in

its *Quarterly Labour Force* that the number of Black professionals grew by a meagre 3% between 1994 and 2014. Yet, in the same period the numbers of White and Indian professionals have grown by 19% and 26% respectively.

These shocking and disturbing statistics show a disconnect between high school and university education in terms of the role the schools' education system is supposed to be playing in helping the country address challenges relating to scarce and critical skills. If we had made it our business to link education goals to the broader economic needs of the country, we would not be moving at a snail's pace in producing Black professionals. School learners will always pass at different percentage distributions. But if our target is just to have a blanket pass rate that fails to take into account those things which we should expect of the country's education throughput, then we have a very serious problem.

The focus on Grade 12 examinations and the targeted pass rates attached to them, diverts the country's attention from the core challenges and problems besetting our education system. We have not done so well in dealing with the dwindling number of learners taking pure Mathematics in Grades 10, 11 and 12.

Many of our children continue to choose Mathematical Literacy, when it has been overwhelmingly declared as not the one required for admission purposes into university programmes that are strategically linked to dealing with the country's shortage of people with critical skills in fields such as engineering, chartered accounting, medicine, and architecture. We even have a dire shortage of mathematics and science teachers, and import those educators from other countries.

The number of learners taking Mathematics in Grade 12 has been dwindling since 2009. Before that - in 2008 - that number hovered slightly above the three hundred thousand mark. The number of Mathematics learners has been fluctuating between 290,000 and 241,000 for the period between 2009 and 2013. Grade 12 Mathematics enrolment for 2014 has now shrunk to just below 233,000! The percentage of Grade 12 learners passing Mathematics with marks between 50% and 100% has been below 28% in the last six years (2008-2013).

The period between 2008 and 2012 witnessed the worst performance in Mathematics, when the failure rate for this subject was at its highest peak: the country recorded a failure rate above 50% for Mathematics between 2008 and 2011. It was only in 2013 that the number of learners failing Grade 12 Mathematics declined to 41%.

A symptom of a much deeper-rooted problem

This dismal performance in Mathematics and other gateway subjects is no longer shocking news to those who follow the country's education throughput. What we see when the Grade 12 results are announced shortly after the December holidays, is a symptom of a much deeper-rooted problem.

For a better analysis and understanding of how we fare in Mathematics and basic education in general, one could refer to the National Annual Assessment (ANA), an evaluation tool that measures school children literacy and numeracy abilities for Grades 1 to 9. In the past three years (2011-2013) we have witnessed a mere 2% of more than 1-million Grade 9 learners passing ANA Mathematics at 50% and above. Less than half of learners writing Grade 9 ANA make it to the Grade 12 level within the first three years of them passing Grade 9. Only a quarter of Grade 9 will continue studying Mathematics up to Grade 12.

So, these extra classes for Grade 12 learners do not help to address the real problems affecting the education of the country. Our emphasis on obtaining a certain pass rate for Grade 12 learners and the efforts and energy invested in this single aim with a particular emphasis are just a waste of time and resources.

Other factors further complicate the kind of problems we have with our education system. For example, we have educators teaching subjects that they are not qualified to teach - including Economic and Management Science (EMS) and others (a practice that is more prevalent in the lower grades). The ANA results also show that there are serious problems at primary schools level, based on the low levels of numeracy and literacy skills among primary school learners.

We therefore need to have a radical mindset shift in terms of putting more focus on, and committing resources to,

education at the lower grades. We also need to ensure that we provide adequate resources towards the teaching of Mathematics, as well as science and technology education at the lower grades. More aggressive and value-adding teacher development programmes should be encouraged for lower grade educators. Perhaps it will be appropriate to investigate the South African Council of Educators' capacity to roll out continuing professional development programmes for educators.

The private sector should also play a constructive role in terms of focusing on sustainable interventions that add real value to the education of the country. We cannot afford to have a situation where we seem to be recycling the education problems with this short-sighted focus on extra classes for Grade 12 learners only. I will be ecstatic to see the day when the Department of Basic Education and its provincial structures and private companies organise week-long camps for Grade 7 and 9 learners.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Matsoso Tsoaeli is Project Director of Transformation & Growth at the South African Institute of Chartered Accountants (SAICA), Johannesburg

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