



# NATIONAL NEWS FLASH



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## SCHOOL DROPOUT RATE: NAPTOSA'S VIEW CONFIRMED

NAPTOSA noted with interest the recent research report on the learner flow through schools by the Stellenbosch University's Research on Socioeconomic Policy (RESEP) group.

Although the report's main aim was to present a picture of the kind of data analysis that is possible with high quality education data that is becoming increasingly available through initiatives undertaken to improve South Africa's major school administrative data system (SA-SAMS), the media focus was on the finding that 10 learner years at high school are required for every matric pass. According to the researchers, this is because some who eventually matriculate only do so after having repeated once or more, but mainly because more students spend some years in high school without ever reaching or passing matric.

For NAPTOSA the value of the report lies in the findings on the school dropout rate which confirms NAPTOSA's long held view that the annual matric results are of little value in assessing the functionality and effectiveness of our education system if the number of learners who successfully complete the National Senior Certificate examinations annually are not compared to the number of that cohort that enrolled in Grade 1.

Even more important, the report validates our contention that "gatekeeping" is prevalent in our education system to enhance matric results. The research found that the real dropout problem is now concentrated in Grades 10 and 11, where 11% of learners in each of those grades dropped out in 2018. **There is no disputing that provincial education departments, through their district offices, continue to pressurise high schools to perform without providing assistance for the non-academic child trapped in an academic system. Schools react by holding back learners in Grades 10 and 11 to enhance their standings in the matric results league table. Provinces and Districts turn a blind eye to these manipulations.**

Another research paper recently found that approximately 700 000 learners have dropped out from school since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Though we expressed doubts regarding the magnitude of the figure, it remains a fact, from research conducted by the education unions, that a vast number of learners have failed to return to school during this period. As sad as it is, it should not distract from the real issue, namely that the reasons for the huge dropout rate of learners over the course of their schooling, especially in Grades 10 and 11, is of the Department of Basic Education's (DBE) own making.

When your focus is on performance and pass rate percentages, and not the education of learners, the dropout of learners is relegated to an issue of lesser importance. When has the DBE ever raised the dropout issue in the celebrations of the matric results? It is better for the Department's matric pass rate image if academically weaker learners are held back in Grades 10 and 11, lest they negatively affect the pass rate. This is borne out by the research that found that learners seem to get "stuck" (a euphemism for deliberate retention) in Grade 10 for two or more years, and only a fraction of learners manage to make it to Grade 12.

A week or two ago we had the release of the unemployment figures for South Africa which indicated that the majority of the unemployed do not have matric. What greater incentive can there be than to pursue a policy of enabling as many learners as possible to reach and pass matric. It is our contention that a learner who progresses to matric and fails to pass is less likely to drop out of the education system than a learner that is purposely held back in Grades 10 and 11 in order for provincial education departments to achieve matric pass rate bragging rights.

We await the day when not the matric pass rate, but the percentage of learners who started Grade 1 and passes matric becomes the headlines. NAPTOSA will continue its pursuit of this goal.

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