



RESPONSE

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Telling Statistics

Every year, with the release of the matric results, statistics take centre stage while the hard work of the successful matriculants is often just a sideshow. So, before we join many others in the national sport of analysing the matric results, let us celebrate the successes of those who managed to pass despite the serious hardships that many of the candidates had to overcome during the long journey to matric. It is an achievement just to make it to matric, considering that of the 923 463 pupils who enrolled in grade 1 in 2000, only 348 117 passed matric in 2011 (that is 38% of those who started school 12 years ago).

The American humorist, Evan Esar, famously quipped that statistics is the "... only science that enables different experts using the same figures to draw different conclusions". We cannot, however, despite the insight of Mr Esar, completely ignore the statistics because they point to some of the underlying problems inherent in our education system. The celebration by Minister Angie Motshekga of the 'increase' in the pass rate – up from 67.7 percent in 2010 to 70.2 percent in 2011 – does not, unfortunately, paint the full picture. There were 41 453 fewer full-time candidates who wrote matric in 2011 compared to 2010, and fewer candidates passed (in 2010 364 147 passed, compared to 348 117 in 2011). Also, some 20 716 fewer candidates wrote and passed maths (263 034 in 2010; 224 635 in 2011).

Both the high rate of attrition over the 12 years of schooling, and the fact that there has been a decline in matric candidates in absolute terms, are seriously concerning. If fewer and fewer pupils are going to get as far as even attempting matric, then despite healthy increases in the pass rate we will still be left with huge numbers of young people for whom the doors of further learning are effectively shut.

Moreover, the overall pass rate is a poor indicator of the quality of education; a better indicator would be the percentage of candidates who qualified to study for a Bachelor's degree. Here there has been a marginal increase in 2011, but a more significant rise of 4% when compared to 2008. On the face of it, this is quite an achievement, but sadly only a handful of those qualifying to study at a tertiary institution will do so; and of those who enter a tertiary institution, at least a third are likely to drop out in their first year, and after five years just one in three will have a degree.

Is there hope? Yes there is. The MECs for Education in the best-performing provinces tell us that the top schools have a few things in common – strong school leadership with dedicated principals, department heads and SGBs; teachers that have good content knowledge and a good understanding of the best teaching techniques; responsible and disciplined students; and families and communities

that take an active interest in the education of their children. The challenge is to find ways of making these factors the norm in our schools, rather than the exception.

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