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RESPONSE

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The 2014 Matric Results

While much has been written and said about the National Senior Certificate (NSC) results released almost a week ago, a few issues are worth commenting on: firstly, the decline in the pass rate should not necessarily be viewed as a negative; secondly, the dropout rate is alarmingly high; and thirdly, the cheating pandemic threatens the integrity of the examinations as a whole.

The 2.4 percentage-point drop in the pass rate should be viewed as a glass half full rather than a glass half empty. Minister Angie Motshekga and her Department of Basic Education endured much criticism over the last few years due to the rise in the matric pass rate. Much of the criticism echoed the refrain that the matric exam standards had been dropped to improve statistics. With a decrease in the pass rate this year, some critics have argued that the Department did not do enough to help matrics, for example with extra lessons and ‘boot camps’. However, other commentators, including the chairperson of the quality assurance body Umalusi, Professor John Volmink, believe that the decrease in the pass rate can be ascribed to the rigour of the national Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS). According to Minister Motshekga, CAPS policy changes infused “quality into the system” and raised “standards and cognitive demands reflected in the curriculum.”¹ The pass rates for mathematics and physical science dropped from 59.1% and 67.4% in 2013 to 53.5% and 61.5% respectively in 2014, due to more rigorous “cognitive demands”. For example, those who sat for the mathematics exams only wrote two papers - with elements of the previously optional third paper, such as Euclidean Geometry and Probability - now made compulsory. Subjects such as Physical Science and Business Studies are also said to have demanded much more of learners than previously. Seen in this light, the decline in matric results can be viewed as reflecting an increase in exam standards, something which should serve us well in the long run. Of course, the glass could have been fuller, if, as some of the teacher unions and others are arguing, teachers had been better prepared to implement the CAPS.

The most significant number of the 2014 NSC exams is not the 2.4 percentage point drop in the pass rate, but rather the 719 211 learners who did not make it to matric. For every 100 pupils that started their school journey in 2003, only 48 wrote matric, and of these, only 36 passed, with only 14 doing well enough to go to university². This attrition rate is alarming, and instead of focusing too narrowly on the matric pass rate, much more attention is needed to address the problems associated with ensuring that those who enter the schooling system stay in the system. It is particularly interesting to note that the dropout rate escalates dramatically in Grades 10 and 11. What are the reasons for this?

¹ Minister Angie Motshekga (2014): *National Senior Certificate Examination 2014: School Performance Report*.

² Nic Spaull (2014): *Education woes go far deeper than matric rate*. Sunday Times, 11 January 2015.

Are under-performing learners being ‘eased out’ to ensure better matric results? Do they leave to pursue further studies at FET colleges? Or do they simply end up joining the unemployable masses? That these learners enter FET colleges seems highly unlikely, as the total number of young people who gained a technical or vocational qualification in 2012 was a mere 6 018. These questions, and finding answers to them, should occupy the minds of policy makers, educationists and teacher unions alike.

Finally, optimism around the matric results must also be tempered by the incidents of ‘group’ cheating. More than 5 000 candidates were implicated, but more distressing is the fact that the candidates were aided by invigilators or exam officials. Not only did the cheating compromise the integrity of the exams, but it also speaks to the lengths candidates will go to obtain a matric certificate that may be their only ticket out of desperate socio-economic circumstances. The complicity of teachers, which can in no way be condoned, is also symptomatic of the pressure put on schools to improve their results. A matric pass has taken on such a significance that the pressures on the candidates to do well are enormous. It is encouraging to hear, then, that the Minister has promised that all those implicated in the cheating - candidates, teachers, and exam officials - will face the necessary sanctions.

What we can all take away from the NSC 2014 exams is that interventions to address the many educational challenges will have to be implemented from the foundation phase – doing so in matric is too late. In the meantime, we may have to accept slightly lower pass rates over the next few years as the price of improving the standards of the curriculum and the examination.

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