



## Keeping Learners in School

*'South Africa loses half of every cohort that enters the school system by the end of the 12 year schooling period, wasting significant human potential and harming the life-chances of many young people.'*

Mr. H M Mweli, Director-General, Department of Basic Education

### 1. Introduction

In South Africa, only half of the learners who start their 12-year schooling journey manage to complete it to matric. In 2002 approximately 1.1 million learners started their schooling, yet by 2014 only 550 000 remained. The dropout rate is alarming and the reasons why learners fail to complete their schooling are complex and diverse.

The Catholic Parliamentary Liaison Office recently held a roundtable to explore the reasons for the high dropout rate as well as possible solutions. Speakers included Robyn Beere (Director: Inclusive Education South Africa), Farrell Hunter (Country Director: DVV International), and Ruschda O'Shea (Principal: Tafelsig High School).

### 2. The Reasons for Dropping Out

According to Statistics South Africa's 2014 General Household Survey (GHS), almost a quarter of young people surveyed cited at least eight main reasons for exiting the schooling system early. The number one reason cited (23% of those surveyed) is a lack of money for school fees, followed by (2) poor academic performance; (3) having too many family commitments; (4) suffering from illness and/or disability; (5) seeing education as useless; (6) having completed education to the level they wanted; (7) working at home; and (8) struggling getting to school.

What was evident from the discussion at the roundtable was the fact that the high percentage of girls dropping out can be attributed to a large extent to pregnancy. According to Nic Spaull,<sup>1</sup>

"In 2010, there were 480,157 female learners enrolled in grade 8, but by matric 2014 there were only 289,795 female learners. So 190,362 girls failed, dropped out or were held back between 2010 and 2014. [National Income Dynamics Study] NIDS shows that teen pregnancy and childbearing account for 33% of drop-out amongst female learners. This suggests that 62,819 female learners dropped out of school between 2010 and 2014 because they fell pregnant and gave birth."

Robyn Beere argued at the roundtable that the impact of socio-economic factors; progression from one grade to the next without support; and the practice of forcing out weak learners before they reach matric, were all factors that contributed to the dropout rate. Over and above these, there were also some systemic issues within schools that impacted negatively on learner retention. A lack of extra-mural activities, the non-inclusion of learners in decision making, and low levels of motivation from teaching staff were cited by participants at the roundtable. These issues often lead learners to feel disenfranchised from the schooling community.

Ms Beere's argument was largely echoed by Mr Hunter, who emphasised that learners often dropped out because the curriculum does not provide alternatives for the varied interest of learners. His organisation, DVV International (the German Adult Education Association) employs a 'popular education' approach, and works extensively with youth who find themselves out of school. This approach concentrates on the daily realities of the participants so that they can decide what they learn about. This programme has been implemented, with the support of the Department

of Higher Education and Training, in the various peri-urban and rural communities of Cape Agulhas. Participants in these programmes 'analyse everyday situations and problems, inclusively organise new information, and develop skills that enable them to change their social relationships'<sup>2</sup>.

### 3. How To Stem the Tide

The strategies for keeping learners in school are as varied as the reasons for the learners dropping out. For example, it is interesting to note that the number one reason cited in the General Household Survey is a lack of finance to access schooling, yet more than 60% of public schools are no-fee schools. The no-fee school policy was implemented by the Department of Basic Education precisely to provide access to education to poorer learners, so it is disturbing that a lack of finance is still apparently such a barrier to continued education. One explanation may be that even in no-fee schools, learners are expected to pay for 'extras' such as outings, cultural activities and so on. Children whose families cannot afford even small amounts may be inclined to drop out, rather than face exclusion from these activities. It is also possible, though, that in some cases lack of finance is falsely given as the reason when in fact something else is happening – a learner is struggling academically, for example, or has disciplinary problems.

It seems, though, according to Ruschda O'Shea,<sup>3</sup> principal of Tafelsig High School, that there are strategies that can be employed to change the environment and culture in schools to make them places where learners want to be. In 2010, when Ms O'Shea was appointed as principal, the school had a student population of 980 – six years later it has increased to 1285.

What has changed at the school to make learners want to be there instead of dropping out?

According to Ms O'Shea's input, the success of her school in retaining and attracting learners started with changing certain practices and policies. The administration was streamlined; extra-curricular activities were increased from four (in 2010) to 13 (in 2016); the school invited, and cultivated relationships with, NGOs to deliver services to its community; and the capacity of its computer laboratories was improved. To alleviate the financial impact of all this on parents, Ms O'Shea encouraged them to apply for school fee

exemptions – currently, more than 80% of the parents have done so. (It was evident from the discussions that many parents often do not apply for the exemption, and that this may be behind their children dropping-out.)

Other measures employed by Ms O'Shea included motivating learners through quarterly prize-giving, and awarding academic and sporting 'colours' and badges. It is clear from the roundtable discussion that a one-size-fits-all approach to finding solutions is not feasible because the reasons for dropping out are so diverse. Ms O'Shea argued that "the people taking the decisions should touch base with the people on the ground and consult with all stakeholders" in order to find learner retention solutions that respond to the multitude of challenges.

The Department of Basic Education has responded to the dropout crisis, but its strategies – like the Second Chance Matric Strategy – are said to be too little too late. According to Ms Beere<sup>4</sup>, the Department should "address the inequality in South African schools and implement and fund inclusive education to address learner diversity". She further argued that, "if we are to build an inclusive economy and society, we have to start by building an education system that is inclusive and that supports the development of all learners to reach their full potential and become independent, active citizens".

Strategies like the Second Chance tend to focus on the end of the learner's schooling career instead of trying to stem the tide earlier. What is a positive move, though, is the Department's new 'three tiered'<sup>5</sup> schooling system, which will provide learners with the option of pursuing one of three streams: academic, technical occupational or technical vocational. The technical occupational stream is aimed at producing students who can leave matric and immediately enter the workplace, with skills like spray-painting, woodwork, and hairdressing; while the academic stream will resemble the current schooling system, with a focus on academic studies. The technical vocational stream will include subjects like engineering and technical drawing, and will be aimed at students who want to study trades like boiler-making and fitting and turning after school. The system will be piloted in 58 schools in 2017, and it is hoped that the three-tiered system will provide learners with enough options and encouragement to complete their schooling.

#### 4. Conclusion

Learner drop-out or “push-out” is a major challenge that requires a multi-pronged intervention strategy. Some policy initiatives have been taken, but these are often geared at the wrong end of the 12-year schooling journey. It is encouraging, though, that the Department is working on a system that will offer better options for learners and hopefully encourage them to stay

in school longer. It is also encouraging that schools have realised that the solutions often exist not so much in policy documents, but rather in the progressive, innovative spirit of principals like Ms O’Shea, with the necessary support from parents and communities, and from the multitude of NGOs that are willing to assist.

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<sup>1</sup> Child Gauge (2015): *Schooling in South Africa: How low-quality education becomes a poverty trap.*

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.dvv-international.de/en/worldwide/africa/southern-africa/south-africa/>

<sup>3</sup> Ruschda O’Shea (2016): *Tafelsig – our school and its community.* Presentation to the CPLO roundtable on learner retention.

<sup>4</sup> Robyn Beere (2016): *South Africa’s schooling system feeds youth unemployment: What are we doing to reduce high learner drop out/push out rates?* Presentation to the CPLO roundtable on learner retention.

<sup>5</sup> [www.digitalplatforms.co.za](http://www.digitalplatforms.co.za): *New schooling system planned for South Africa*

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