South Africa Education Overview

Key Indicators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5% of GDP (2014) on Education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17.8% of total government spending on Education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Key Policies and Public Programs

- **South African Constitution (1996):** enshrines the right to basic education, including adult education and to further education, which the state, through reasonable measures, must make progressively available and accessible.

- **South African Schools Act (1996):** provides a uniform system for the organization, governance and funding of schools.

- **Further Education and Training Colleges Act (2006):** regulates further education and training.

- **Adult Basic Education and Training Act (2000):** provides for the establishment of public and private adult learning centres, funding, governance and quality assurance mechanisms.

- **White paper for Post-School Education and Training (2013):** all education and training provision for those who have completed school, those who did not complete school, and those who never attended school.

- **Action Plan to 2014: Towards the realisation of schooling 2025** – A long-term plan for transforming basic education in South Africa: 27 national goals at the heart of the government’s long-term vision for schools.

- **Regulations relating to minimum uniform norms and standards for public schooling infrastructure (2013):** these cover areas such as minimum space per learner in a classroom, toilets, electricity and the like.

- **National Education Collaboration Trust (2013):** a civil society-government partnership dedicated to supporting educational reform and school improvement.

Following the first democratic elections in April 1994, one of the priorities of the Government of National Unity (GNU) was educational reform, which was seen as a key vehicle for overcoming the injustices of apartheid. Since then, significant progress has been made in education legislation, policy development and curriculum reform; the allocation of educational resources has clearly been directed by considerations of equity and redress.

South African education is characterized by a system of cooperative governance, with clearly articulated power sharing between the national and provincial governments. At the national level, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) provides the framework for school policy with administrative responsibility being held by the nine provincial education departments. School governance has been further decentralized, with greater autonomy devolved onto school governing bodies.
South Africa’s National Qualifications Framework (NQF) recognizes three broad bands of education: General Education and Training (GET), Further Education and Training (FET), and Higher Education and Training (HET). Schooling spans 13 years or grades, from grade R (the reception year) through to grade 12. Under the South African Schools Act of 1996, education is compulsory for all South Africans from age 7 to age 15, or upon the completion of grade 9. GET includes Adult Basic Education and Training. Alongside academic schooling, technical and vocational education and training (TVET) is catered for by the state-run FET College sector.

As reflected across the range of indicators used to measure enrollments across the system, since 1994 educational provision has expanded considerably, with what now amounts to universal access in the GET phase of compulsory schooling. Virtually all primary-age children are in school, with equal numbers of girls and boys – on both counts the UN Millennium Development Goals of 2000 have been met. In total, the public schooling system has over 12 million learners, 440 000 teachers in over 30 000 schools.

In addition, South Africa has made significant gains in increasing access at the lower end of the system - 89% of 5-6 year-olds attended an Early Childhood Development (ECD) center or school in 2011. Grade R enrolments in public schools increased from 544 000 in 2009 to just under 800 000 in 2014.

The equality of access has unfortunately not translated into equality of opportunity. As measured on international and regional tests, literacy and numeracy performance of South African children is well below that of their counterparts in countries of similar (and even lower) economic status. This has led some researchers to conclude that many schools serving low-income communities have not significantly improved in terms of educational outcomes since 1994. Educational inequality is deeply entrenched, leading some to characterize schooling in South Africa as a ‘dual economy’ in which a majority of (mainly poor) children are locked into a low-quality system which is able to offer little in the way of meaningful educational opportunities.

Most of the country’s 52 million people speak an indigenous language as their mother tongue. South Africa’s education system generally sees children making the switch to either English or Afrikaans, the only languages of instruction at schools, in Grade 4 by which time they are expected to have understood basic concepts in their mother tongue. However, research undertaken by the South African Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) has revealed that too many students are competent in neither their native nor a second language, with predictably serious consequences for their academic performance and cognitive development. Home language proficiency is critical to later educational success and the issue is further complicated by the fact that many of their teachers are also not fluent in English.

This is against a backdrop of noteworthy efforts by the State to bring about redress, particularly in resource provisioning. For instance, since 2007 when the government introduced no-fee schools, access to free education has grown significantly, with 8.8 million children attending the 60% of public schools, which do not charge fees (up from the 40% in 2009). In addition, through the National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP) almost an equivalent number (8.7 million) of learners are provided with a daily meal.

South Africa has one of the highest GINI co-efficients in the world and it is generally accepted that socio-economic status (SES) is the biggest single determinant of academic achievement, for children who live in poverty have multiple disadvantages – ill health, poor nutrition, poor housing. In some schools, parental involvement is limited by daunting poverty, illiteracy, low parental self-perceptions, poor channels of communication and economic insecurity; all of which contribute to educational underachievement. Yet even allowing for this, the country’s underperformance relative to its neighbors in Southern Africa with similar levels of poverty and significantly fewer resources, is difficult to explain.

Suffice to say the roots of South Africa’s educational difficulties run deep and the collateral damage of Bantu Education is felt in the system to this day. What has become apparent is the extent to which poor quality teaching and learning has been perpetuated by what is by and large an under-skilled, poorly-incentivized, yet highly-unionized teaching corps, many of whom were themselves products of inferior education. Unfortunately, attempts to improve teaching through qualifications have not resulted in a concomitant improvement in learner performance and numerous professional and organizational development initiatives over the past two decades have in turn failed to impact positively on this problem.
The recruitment, retention and deployment of teachers are part of a wider problem faced in the system as a whole. Whereas the best performing education systems tend to be characterized by highly selective teacher recruitment programmes, South Africa faces the same challenges as other middle-income countries (such as Brazil) in that teaching tends to attract the lowest 40% of graduates. Coupled with the current remuneration structure the system offers little reward to teachers who perform well and the flat age-wage profile in turn offers few incentives to remain in the teaching profession after the initial few years.

A further explanation for why learning outcomes are poor is because of poor language proficiency.

This is not to suggest that the state is failing to act. Given the fact that education is a priority in terms of both its goals, as well as its budgetary allocation, the persistent low performance in the academic achievement of learners has prompted the government to undertake a number of initiatives to improve the quality of schooling. Action Plan to 2014 (part of a longer term plan called Schooling 2025) has sought to act upon what has been identified as the key impediments to improving education. Initiatives include: a curriculum review which has resulted in a streamlined and more coherent policy and the development of a series of Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS) developed for all subjects for Grades R to 12. From 2014, CAPS is being implemented across all grades of schooling. The classroom level delivery of the new, more tightly structured curriculum is reinforced in two subject areas, Mathematics and Languages, through a series of prescribed workbooks. These are provided free of charge to all Grade R to 9 learners in public schools. In addition, in the foundation phase (Grades R-3) learners receive workbooks covering the Life Skills curriculum. The development of CAPS is in large part a response to the failed post-apartheid experiment with Outcomes Based Education (OBE) which was controversial from the outset with both teachers and policy-makers. After much criticism and a recognized implementation failure, OBE was phased out from 2010.

Following a Teacher Development Summit held in July 2009, a new, strengthened, integrated plan for teacher development has been developed. The implementation of a nationally coordinated system of Continuing Professional Teacher Development (CPTD) commenced in 2013, with roll-out anticipated to take place over a three-year period (2013-2015).

Finally, the Accelerated Schools Infrastructure Delivery Initiative (ASIDI) forms part of a broader infrastructure programme aimed at achieving a level of optimal functionality with an emphasis on the improvement of existing schools infrastructure. The issue of physical resourcing has been a contentious one in recent years, with civic society organizations, such as Equal Education, having through court order, compelled the Minister of Basic Education to publish for comments the amended draft regulations covering minimum norms and standards for public schooling infrastructure.

Overview of the non-state education sector

The independent schooling sector presently accounts for a relatively small percentage of the overall system. In 2011, the just under 480 000 learners in the 1 207 registered private schools accounted for 3.8% of total enrolments. The sector caters for a broad spectrum of socio-economic and cultural communities. There is a strong and robust independent school movement with a number of associations, the largest of which (ISASA) has over 700 member schools with 160 000 learners.

In addition, schools are organized into active networks according to religious affiliations – there are a number of Christian, Muslim and Jewish associations. Historically, mission schools played a significant role in the education of African children however, their influence declined dramatically in the 1950s and 60s when they were systematically persecuted by the Apartheid regime. More recently, attempts are being made to revive some of these institutions.

Whilst a significant number of schools operate as non-profit organizations, there are a number of for-profit public companies active in the South African market.

Independent schools are eligible for government subsidies on a sliding scale dependent on the fees each school charges and, by corollary, the community it serves. Responsibility for paying these subsidies lies with the provincial education departments; some of whom have in recent years reneged on their commitments in this regard. In April
2013, in a landmark ruling the Constitutional Court clarified the state’s obligations and role in providing subsidies. The judgment found that the ‘unqualified’ right to basic education in terms of Section 29(1)(a) of the Constitution applies also to learners in independent schools.

In recent years, partly in response to the challenges facing public school system to provide educational opportunities, there has been a growth in schools catering for the lower income market. The emergence of low-fee private schools signals what may be a significant shift in this area. Linked to this, there is growing interest in what has been categorized as ‘contract schools’ a term that describes a model where there is partnership between the government (which finances the school) and a private sector provider (which manages it). Proponents of this model argue that contract schooling can bring private sector energy, funding and creativity into the public school sector and in so doing, lift its overall performance. As tends to be acknowledged, evidence on the efficacy of the US charter schools is complex and changing and equivalencies to the South African context are not easily found in the examples are cited from elsewhere in the developing world.

There are still significant challenges faced by advocates of a contract school model - the practicalities of enabling schools to switch to a governance model which sees the decentralization of management control to allow for the hiring and firing of principals and teachers (which is deemed to be central to the effectiveness of contract schooling) seems unlikely in the present political climate.

When it comes to the involvement of the corporate sector in state schooling, corporate social investment (CSI) in all levels of education amounted to around R2 billion per annum in 2009. CSI funding going towards schooling is R1,33 billion, with the remainder allocated to early childhood development (ECD), tertiary education and adult basic education and training (ABET). Almost half of all expenditure in all levels of education (around R956 million) goes towards infrastructure and Mathematics, Science and Technical education. Companies direct funds either to service providers or, particularly in the case of school building and refurbishment projects, to the National or Provincial Departments of Basic Education who identify schools in most need of support. In recent years, there has been a trend away from making available funds (other than relatively small grants) directly to schools or to school foundations.

There is an extensive range of non-profit institutions (NPIs) in South Africa with around 85 000 NPIs presently registered with the Department of Social Development. Of these, 6 000 are active in the education sector. The majority are classified as voluntary associations, but there are a significant number (319) of non-profit organisations (NPOs) and 311 Trusts. A number of these trusts channel the CSI spend of large South African corporations.

In response to the challenges faced by the State education system, over the years significant amounts of CSI money have been assigned to a range of school improvement initiatives, both at a national and regional level. Given the poor performance in literacy and numeracy, there has been a particular focus on building primary school teachers’ subject knowledge and pedagogic skills. Unfortunately, these efforts have by and large not led to desired improvements in learner achievement. This has lead to what has been characterized in some quarters as ‘donor fatigue’.

Partly in reaction this, a major initiative called the National Education Collaboration Trust (NECT) has recently been launched. The NECT was established in mid-2013 as a civil society, corporate and government partnership dedicated to supporting educational reforms and enhanced learner performance. The initiative brings together government, business, labor and civil society in order to pool resources. In addition to focusing directly on school-level improvements, the NECT seeks to strengthen the District and Circuit Offices of the Department of Basic Education (DBE). The lack of adequate organizational support from DBE structures is recognized as a contributing factor to the failure of the system as a whole.

Whilst the NECT has high-level political backing, significant business buy-in and critically, support for teacher unions, it remains to be seen whether or not its ambitious District-wide improvement model can impact positively on the 2 million learners in the 4 000 schools in the eight rural education Districts targeted for the first round of interventions over the next couple of years.

Meanwhile, without any other significant ‘game changer’ in sight, the South African schooling system will continue to punch well below its weight in terms of educational outcomes.
REFERENCES

1. www.un.org/millenniumgoals/
4. The Quality of Primary School Inputs in South Africa. SACMEQ Policy Brief no 2, September 2011
7. South Africa: Mother Tongue Tied By A Eysha Kassiem, 2011
15. www.isasa.org
16. Association of Christian schools (www.acsi.co.za); association of muslim schools (ams-sa.org); catholic schools (www.cso.org.za)
17. www.historicschools.org.za
18. CDE in Depth no 10, Hidden Assets: South Africa’s low-fee private schools, August 2010.
23. nect.org.za