

Out of the box thinking required to address SA's education challenges

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South Africa is facing a looming education crisis with a critical shortage of teachers and school principals, overcrowded classrooms in the public sector and relatively poor educational outcomes. Amidst this reality, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) has announced plans to implement curriculum changes to better equip learners for the future world of work.



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According to the most recent findings of the Teacher Demographic Dividend project, a growing number of teachers have retired or are facing retirement by 2029. In 2013, 7,800 teachers retired compared to 12,500 in 2021. An estimated 17,300 teachers are due to retire in 2029. This will leave the education sector critically short of teachers in the years ahead.

The shortage of teachers is - rather ironically - not because universities are not producing sufficient numbers of teachers but rather because provincial departments of basic education are not hiring enough graduates. In 2021, provinces only hired half of the 28,000 graduating teachers. To maintain the current number of teachers – let alone increase the number – the country will need to employ an additional 6,000 teachers.

The Teacher Demographic Dividend project is being conducted at Stellenbosch University's research on socioeconomic policy. The study started this year and will run until 2024.

Teacher employment challenges

While teacher numbers are decreasing, the number of learners each year is increasing. Learner-educator ratios have increased from 27 to 1 to 30 to 1 and will increase even further if the DBE achieves its goal of motivating more learners to stay in school until they receive a matric pass.

What's holding provinces back from employing more teachers, says the report, are teacher salaries which are growing at a faster rate than the department of education's budget. National collective bargaining agreements have had a hugely negative impact on provincial education budgets. According to Stellenbosch University's Professor Nic Spaull, co-head of the Teacher Demographic Dividend, the rise in teacher salaries has resulted in a real decline in schools' purchasing power. As a result, hiring freezes have been implemented.

A 2020 report by Amnesty International slammed South Africa's education system as broken and perpetuating poverty and inequality. The report highlighted poor and badly maintained infrastructure in public schools including inadequate sanitation, a lack of basic facilities and overcrowded classrooms.

Mitigating educational challenges

Given South Africa's unemployment crisis particularly where the youth are concerned, there is enormous pressure on the DBE to ensure better educational outcomes and equip learners with entrepreneurial skills in order to allow them to compete in the labour market. The DBE plans to introduce coding and robotics into the school curriculum for grades R to 3 and for grade 7 in 2023, for grades 4 to 6 and grade 8 in 2024 and for grade 9's in 2025.

It also intends to introduce a Grade 9 General Education Certificate (GEC) so that learners have some form of qualification before matric by 2024 and incorporate teaching in children's home languages, particularly in the foundation phase. Whether these changes will have the desired impact remains to be seen, particularly considering that even according to the DBE's own statistics, the majority of public schools did not have laboratories, libraries or even the internet in 2018. Some don't have sport facilities or perimeter fencing – the latter for teacher and pupil safety – and a minority had no sanitation facilities at all.

Education system solutions

A failure to establish new government schools in recent decades is likely to be an issue that comes back to haunt us in the years ahead. The public sector would do well to take a leaf out of JSE-listed independent schools group, Curro, which earlier this year announced that it was launching afternoon classes, ostensibly for those not suited to the nature and character of a traditional school routine at its Durbanville High School. The reality, however, is that by introducing an afternoon school Curro is making more efficient use of its classroom space.

To address the many challenges facing the South African education system, we need to start thinking of some innovative solutions or risk our learners being left behind on the global stage.

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