



**22 February 2021**

**Equal Education (EE) media statement: One step forward, one step back: COVID-19 threatens an already fragile education system**

*“My expectation with my matric results is to pass with good marks... It [the matric year] was affected so badly [by COVID-19] that at times we couldn't cope. We had to cover the whole year syllabus in months not only just finishing it but with a mandate of understanding every information given to us... What kept me going is the support our teachers gave us, the support my peers gave me... Also harsh reality hit us that we do not have a choice, we were never given a choice but to push through tough times.”* - **Yolanda Magugu, EE member, matric class of 2020, Gauteng**

*“COVID-19 took precious time away from us... I had to try and adjust to the new normal which came with most of us being mentally affected and led to other sickness such as your everyday headaches and losing interest in almost everything.”* - **Lawrence Manaka, EE member, matric class of 2020, Gauteng**

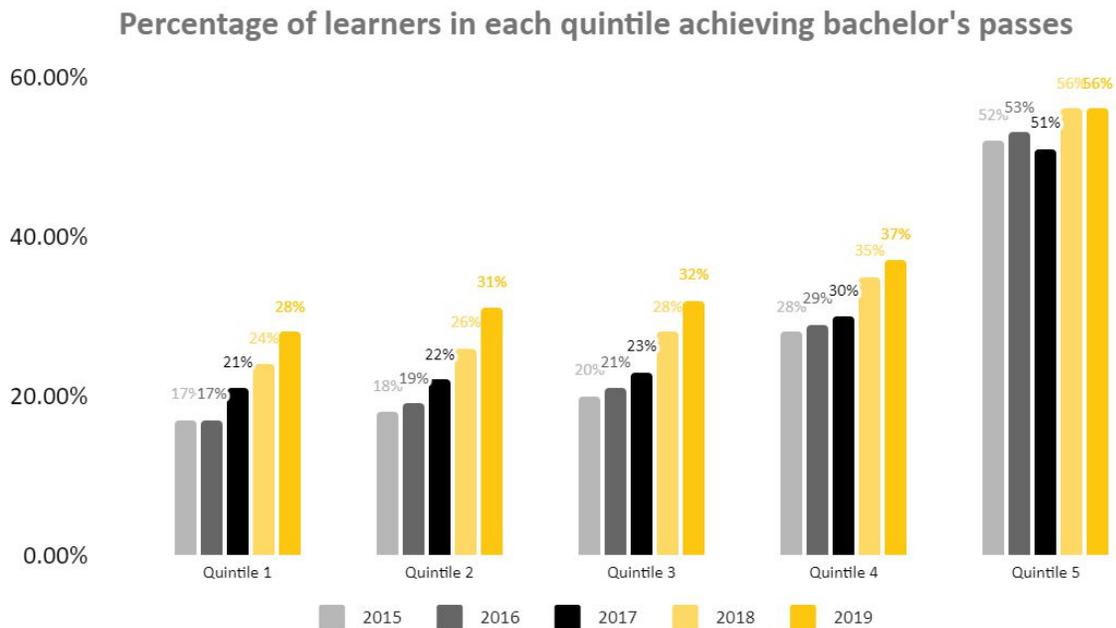
*“We tried our best under the circumstances of COVID-19. The support from parents and teachers, motivating us about going to school even if things are no longer the same, and we did. So they really helped us push and study.”* - **Sphamandla Qwabaza, EE member, matric class of 2020, Eastern Cape**

Equal Education (EE) salutes you, matric class of 2020, as you await the release of your results tomorrow. In your final year of school you unfairly faced many difficulties, made worse by the COVID-19 pandemic. You lost a significant amount of teaching time when your schools were closed, while also having to cover the full curriculum. Food insecurity and health anxieties grew in your communities, and as last year came to a close, the leaking of the maths paper two and physical sciences paper two exam questions was yet another hurdle to overcome. We welcome and are relieved by Umalusi's decision to approve the 2020 matric results, because the integrity of the National Senior Certificate had not been significantly impacted.

We applaud the effort and time invested by teachers, parents/guardians, and education officials to support learners during this unprecedented moment.

Over the last five years, there have been small but positive changes in the performance of Grade 12 learners. There has been a steady improvement in the number of Bachelor passes from learners in quintile one to three schools, as shown in the graph below. That being said, learners in quintile five schools consistently achieve more Bachelor passes. Other measures of national progress, though imperfect, also show improvement in our education system, such as the Trends in International Maths

and Science Study<sup>1</sup> (TIMSS) and the Southern and Eastern African Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality<sup>2</sup> (SACMEQ). Despite South Africa’s low position in the overall rankings, our country’s rate of improvement has been one of the fastest. Importantly, the improvements have been in poorly performing schools.<sup>3</sup> While education outcomes have been improving in the country, and that improvement is off a low base, this “ray of hope” is likely to dim because of COVID-19.



### One step forward, one step back

The closure of schools during the nationwide lockdown left millions of learners unable to continue with traditional learning. Not all schools and learners were able to adjust equally - learners from poor and working-class households were more heavily affected by COVID-19 disruptions to schooling.

Last year, we witnessed long-standing inequalities within the education sector highlighted both in and outside of schools, with better-resourced public schools able to facilitate remote learning, while learners who attend under-resourced, rural and township schools, struggled.<sup>4</sup> In wealthier households, it has

<sup>1</sup> The Trends in International Maths and Science Study is a world wide study of Grade 4 and Grade 8 Mathematics and Science competency levels per country.

<sup>2</sup> The Southern and Eastern African Consortium for Monitoring Educational Equality (SACMEQ) is a network of ministries of education who conduct standardised surveys to assess the quality of education in Southern and Eastern Africa.

<sup>3</sup>Gustafsson, M & Nuga C., 2020. How is the COVID-19 pandemic affecting educational quality in South Africa: Evidence to date and future risks. Available at: [https://cramsurvey.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Gustafsson.-Nuga.-How-is-the-COVID-19-pandemic-affectin-g-educational-quality-in-South-Africa\\_-1.pdf](https://cramsurvey.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Gustafsson.-Nuga.-How-is-the-COVID-19-pandemic-affectin-g-educational-quality-in-South-Africa_-1.pdf),

<sup>4</sup> Briefing by the Department of Basic Education, 2020. Schooling during COVID-19 lockdown. Available at: <https://pmg.org.za/committee-meeting/30116/>.

been easier to sustain online learning compared to poorer households, where many learners do not have desks, books, computers or access to the internet.<sup>5</sup> For instance, only 20% of learners in no-fee schools have computers at home, compared to about 50% of learners in fee-paying schools.<sup>6</sup>

The Department of Education (DBE) and provincial education departments introduced several interventions to support some learning to continue from home while schools were closed, by providing printed workbooks as well as broadcasting lessons on radio and television.<sup>7</sup> Despite these attempts, learners from under-resourced households experienced greater barriers to accessing printed materials, online learning services, and other learning support.

In March 2020, nearly 400 Equalisers - high school members of EE - participated in a survey about their experiences of the hard lockdown. Nearly a quarter of these learners were completing matric and found studying during the lockdown particularly difficult:

*"We are a large family with children and it's noisy. We can't get to libraries. Also we can't form a small (study) group with my mates because they stay far from my home."* - **Grade 12 learner (2020), KwaZulu-Natal**

*"It's lack of data and not being able to upload activities, assignments and study notes. And lack of assistance from our teachers because they just send through school work without explaining further or attending to any questions and misunderstandings; also when we able to send some of the assignments or exercises they don't send back any feedback on how we did, so we stay in confusion of not knowing what we clearly know and what we still missing out. It's really hard to study and do most of the work alone with zero assistance or guidance, especially as a Grade 12 learner."* - **Grade 12 learner (2020), Eastern Cape**

*"(The) home environment and school environment are completely different. You get more understanding of things when you are being taught by your teacher, rather than by learning things on your own and doing your own research for answers."* - **Grade 12 learner (2020), Western Cape**

The feedback from learners highlights the unequal learning conditions which were made worse by COVID-19. Many schools were unable to re-open because they [lacked resources, including basic infrastructure](#), to comply with COVID-19 protocols. For this reason, some learners were out of school for longer than others. These inequalities are even more painful because in order to be successful, all learners have to write the same matric exam.

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<sup>5</sup> Reddy, V., Soudien, C. and Winnaar, L., 2020. Disrupted learning during COVID-19: The impact of school closures on education outcomes in South Africa. Available at:

<http://www.hsrc.ac.za/en/review/hsrc-review-july-2020/disrupted-learning-during-covid19>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

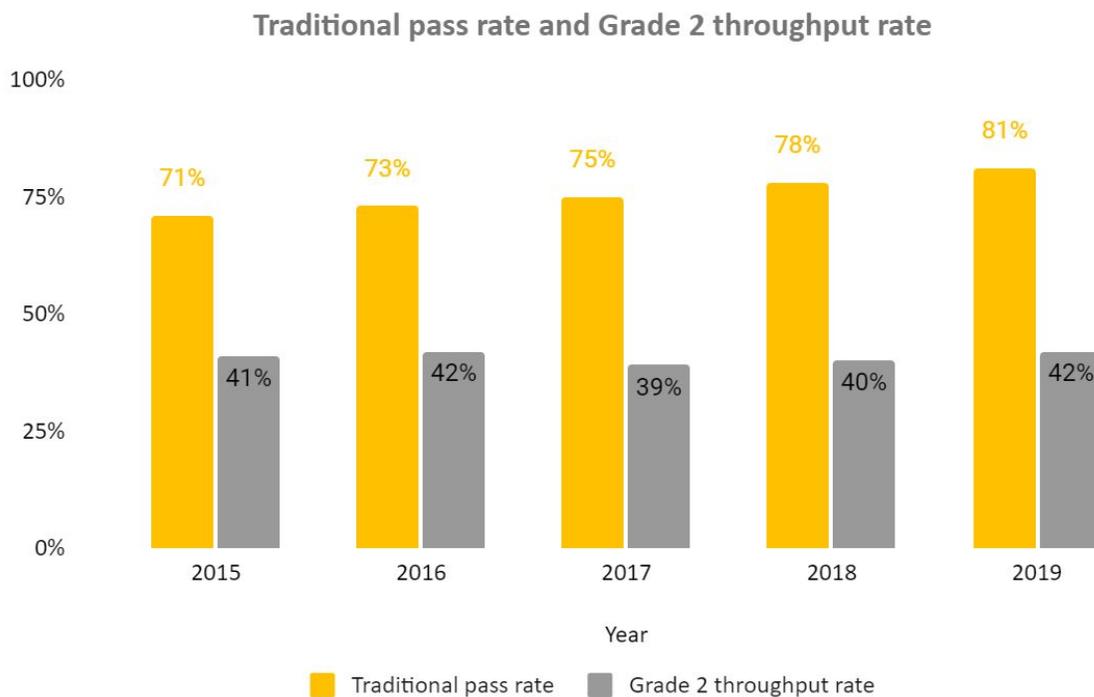
<sup>7</sup> Department of Education, Government of South Africa, 2020. Minister Angie Motshekga on Basic Education Sector Plans to Support Learners during Coronavirus COVID-19 Lockdown. Available at:

<https://www.gov.za/speeches/minister-angie-motshekga-basic-education-sector-plans-support-learners-during-covid-19>.

## Learners leaving the schooling system

Even prior to the outbreak of the pandemic, keeping learners in school and ensuring that they leave having received a meaningful education that prepares them well for participating in society, was one of the key challenges in South Africa's public education system.

Due to consistently high learner dropout rates, we consider the throughput rate alongside the traditional matric pass rate. This is shown in the graph below. We define the throughput rate as the percentage of learners who were in Grade two together, and who 10 years later, went on to pass matric together. This is not a perfect measure, but gives a better picture of the percentage of learners who end up completing their schooling.<sup>8</sup>



Crises such as schools being closed for long periods of time are likely to contribute to increases in the number of learners dropping out. With the added hardship of the pandemic, some learners were forced to abandon school to support their families financially and with other responsibilities. Late last year, the

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<sup>8</sup> The DBE's own calculations show that, even if one takes into account young people who get a matric qualification later on (for instance, after they have left school), the number of young people who end up getting a matric qualification, is likely still around 50%. See <https://pmg.org.za/committee-question/12672/> and <https://www.education.gov.za/Portals/0/Documents/Reports/Education%20Sector%20review%202015%20-%20202016.pdf>

DBE estimated that 326 000 learners were unaccounted for since the start of the year - although the department has stated it will only this year have a clearer picture of the learners lost.<sup>9</sup>

*“My dream is what kept me going. Most learners ended up dropping out because of the pressure. I had to study day and night to achieve my dream. I had to make it happen for myself because 12 years of studying is a long time.”* - **Ntombi Mngomezulu, EE member, matric class of 2020, KwaZulu-Natal**

The DBE says it plans to decrease the school dropout rate by introducing a “back to school” campaign this year in the hope of encouraging learners to return and/or remain in school.<sup>10</sup> While little information on the campaign is available in the public domain, we support efforts that encourage learners to stay in school. It is also important that the DBE is not reactive to learner dropout. To curb learner dropouts, we have consistently highlighted the importance of strengthening foundation phase learning. Interventions such as the school nutrition programme, access to scholar transport and psychosocial support are also critical in keeping learners in school.

### **Fix and fund public schools!**

Years of not providing public schools with enough money and other resources, such as safe and dignified school infrastructure, has left them ill-prepared to face the COVID-19 pandemic. As part of its austerity agenda, we have seen the government place less importance on education when deciding how to spend its money, and last year, there were [severe budget cuts](#) which have immediate and lasting negative consequences.

Learners and teachers in under-resourced public schools cannot continue to fight against the odds to achieve excellence. This is an [unfair burden](#) to carry.

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**Note to editors:** The authors of this statement are Hopolang Selebalo (Equal Education Head of Research), Stacey Jacobs (Equal Education Researcher), and Elizabeth Biney (Equal Education Researcher).

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<sup>9</sup> Nkosi, B. 326 000 pupils believed to have dropped out between April and October. Available at: <https://www.iol.co.za/the-star/news/326-000-pupils-believed-to-have-dropped-out-between-april-and-october-39117879-69c5-466b-89de-2dea8f155040>

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*