

POVERTY AND SCHOOL PARTICIPATION:

facts, figures and
possible interventions



prepared by social surveys

INTRODUCTION

This fact sheet is designed for educators, concerned community and parent organisations, as well as education officials. It provides some facts and figures on the impact of poverty on children’s attendance at school, and on their participation in education more generally. It also offers suggestions on how to reduce the negative impact of poverty on children’s education in South Africa.

This fact sheet, the second in a series of five, is based on the Access to Education study, which was undertaken by Social Surveys and the Centre for Applied Legal Studies (CALS). The study focuses on the barriers children and youth aged 7 to 18 face, entering and completing school. It began with in-depth conversations with educators, caregivers and youth in urban and rural communities on the barriers and difficulties youth face in remaining in school. In late 2007 Social Surveys travelled across all the provinces in South Africa, conducting a nationally representative household survey with caregivers in 4400 households. Youth in these households who were aged 16 to 18 were also interviewed. Our research showed that household poverty is one of the main reasons that children and youth between the ages of 7 and 18 leave school before completing Matric.

FACTS

60% of schools in South Africa have been declared no-fees schools (schools in Quintiles 1 to 3). Children attending these schools therefore should not have to pay fees. Low income households whose children are attending fee-paying schools can apply for a Fees Exemption, which either waives the full or partial cost of school fees.

WHAT OUR RESEARCH SAYS ABOUT POVERTY AND SCHOOL DROP-OUT

HOW DOES POVERTY CAUSE YOUTH TO LEAVE SCHOOL BEFORE COMPLETING MATRIC?	
The cost of education.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Poor households may struggle to pay for basic education costs such as uniforms, transport and stationery. Households may also struggle to pay for school fees. Although school fees should not be a barrier to access because of the No-Fees and Fees Exemption Policies, some schools may still exclude learners, or caregivers may not know that their children can still attend school, even if they cannot pay school fees (see below).
Social exclusion of poorer learners.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Poorer children may be socially excluded by learners or educators at the school, or other parents (<i>in the School Governing Body: SGB</i>). For example, schools may not tell parents about the Fees Exemption Policy, or they may punish learners for not paying fees (<i>such as withholding report cards or making learners stand in class</i>). Poorer learners may feel acutely conscious of not being able to afford the things that other learners in their class can afford. Youth in our focus groups and survey described their decision to leave school due to their embarrassment at not being able to afford the basics like lunch, money for civvies day, shoes and so on (<i>Dieltiens, V. and Meny-Gibert, S. 2009</i>).
Shocks to the household.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Financial or other pressures on the household (<i>such as a death in the family; sickness of a caregiver or breadwinner caused by HIV/Aids or other illnesses</i>) may cause children to leave school temporarily or permanently. Children may also have to leave school to look after a sick family member, look after younger siblings, seek work and so on.



FACTS

- 50% of caregivers of children aged 7 to 18 said that poverty was the primary reason that their child was out of school.
Source: Household Survey: Caregiver interviews.
- While less than 1% of children had been denied access to school due to their inability to pay school fees, 32% of children whose parents had struggled to pay school fees, had been punished in some way for late or non-payment of fees.
Source: Household Survey: Caregiver interviews.

HOW ELSE DOES POVERTY IMPACT ON CHILDREN & YOUTHS' EDUCATION?

Children who live in poverty are more likely to experience delays to their progress through schooling, mainly caused by having to repeat a grade. Children in poor households are more vulnerable to multiple grade repetition (see *Factsheet 4: Grade Repetition in South Africa*). This is partly because poor children are more likely to be accessing poor quality schools, and partly because poverty has a direct impact on children's ability to learn. For example learners in poor households may find it difficult to find a quiet place to study in over-crowded homes, they may have a bigger burden of household and caring responsibilities than other children, or they may find it hard to concentrate because of hunger.

DISPELLING MYTHS ABOUT POVERTY AND SCHOOL ATTENDANCE

- While living in poverty makes children far more vulnerable to drop-out from school, the large majority of children living in poor households are still attending school: 96.4% of children aged 7 to 18 are in school, despite widespread poverty. (Many of these youth, however, will not complete Matric for a range of reasons: drop out increases after the age of 16, in the FET grades (10 to 12): see *Factsheet 1: School Drop-out in South Africa*).

- School fees are not the primary barrier to accessing and completing school for poor children in South Africa, partly due to the positive impact of No-Fees schools and the Fees Exemption Policy. Less than 1% of caregivers reported having had their child denied access for non-payment of fees. Yet the cost of education may still create a barrier to accessing education for some poor households, because other access costs remain high – particularly school uniforms.
- In some cases, poverty may incentivise regular school attendance because schools offer households additional resources: a school acts as a child care facility for younger children, and many schools now have school feeding or nutrition programmes which offer children a basic daily meal.

FACTS

QUOTES FROM OUR FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS WITH LEARNERS:

- *“I attend night school... at home there are many of us and I am the oldest so my mother decided that I should go to night school because we don’t have to wear uniforms. That will enable her to buy school uniforms for my other siblings. My mother is the only one who is working.”*
- *“You feel like you don’t exist when your classmates start to talk about how their mothers cooked using the microwave. You feel small... if we had electricity we wouldn’t be using paraffin stoves or candles...”*
- *“You can’t study at night because sometimes your mother does not have money to buy enough paraffin for you to study till late.” (50% of households paid up to R600 per year on school uniform costs.)*



WHAT MIGHT HELP TO REDUCE THE NEGATIVE IMPACT OF HOUSEHOLD POVERTY ON SCHOOL ATTENDANCE AND LEARNING?

While there are no simple solutions to reducing the negative impact of poverty on children and youths’ education, there are clearly ‘supporting interventions’ that can be provided within the school environment and at home/in the community to reduce the impact of poverty.

What can government do?

- Educate parents and school children about the No-fees and Fees Exemption Policy, as well as National Guidelines on School Uniforms. While very few schools prevent learners from attending school because of non-payment of school fees, some learners are still being punished because their caregivers cannot pay fees. It is important that children and caregivers know their rights to access education even if they cannot afford to pay fees, or other access costs like uniforms.
- Ensure that all resources from provincial government reach schools at the appropriate and scheduled time. When principals do not receive funding, textbooks and other resources on time (*particularly at the beginning of the year*) they are incentivised to demand fees from caregivers, including those in poor households.
- Look at ways of reducing other access costs, especially transport and school uniforms. This may include monitoring the extent to which schools are accessing and utilising the National Guidelines on School Uniforms, and the extent to which learners are being prevented from accessing school due to stringent school policies on uniforms.
- Ensure that all school feeding schemes under the School Nutrition Programme are operating *regularly*.
- The roll out of the School Nutrition Programme to a broader range of secondary schools is welcomed. Monitor the roll out of the School Nutrition Programme to secondary schools to ensure that all relevant learners are benefiting. Our focus group discussions with learners suggested that there is a stigma attached to using school feeding or school nutrition programmes in some schools, which prevents some poor learners from accessing the meal provided.
- The extension of counselling services and access to social workers for a broader range of learners is vital. Poorer learners often carry a heavy burden of worry and concern about financial and other family stresses, especially those children living in child-headed households.

What can principals and educators do?

- In fee-paying schools ensure that all caregivers and learners are aware that they may apply for a full or partial fees exemption on their school fees.
- Ensure that all caregivers and learners know that they are allowed to attend school even if they cannot afford the official school uniform.
- Ensure that the official school uniform is not unnecessarily expensive, and does not change often.
- Ensure that learners have access to a meal at school.
- Explore ways to reduce the stigma attached to the use of school feeding schemes (*if such stigma exists in the school*).
- Assist households that do not access social grants (*such as the child support grant*) to apply for the grant.

What can community organisations, NGOs, and CSI initiatives do?

- Offer support to learners: provide drop-in centres after school to support learners with homework, tutoring programmes, and the provision of extracurricular activities.
- Ensure that children and caregivers know their rights to access education even if they cannot afford to pay fees, or other access costs like uniforms. Educate parents and school children about the No-fees and Fees Exemption Policy, as well as National Guidelines on School Uniforms.
- Provide support to small and medium sized enterprises, and local community income generating projects to provide affordable school uniforms and sports clothes in their local community.



WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF STAYING IN/RETURNING TO SCHOOL?

- Leaving school before completion reduces the opportunities to access better-paid jobs.
- Children who leave school are more likely to engage in high risk social behaviour such as substance abuse, engagement in crime, or sexual activity which leads to pregnancy (*Palmary 2002, RHRU 2003, Hargreaves et al 2007*).
- Staying in school has a protective effect on youth in South Africa (*Lloyd et al 2008*).



EXAMPLES FROM THE FIELD

Caregivers can obtain advice on social grant applications and other paralegal advice from the **Black Sash Helpline**: help@blacksash.org.za or 072-66 33 739.

The CALS booklet “*School fees: know your rights*”, is available in four South African languages.

CALS also provides a calculator to help caregivers work out what exemption discount they can get on school fees: <http://web.wits.ac.za/Academic/CLM/Law/CALS/Education/SchoolFeesBooklets.htm>

RELATED LINKS

Social Surveys:

www.socialsurveys.co.za

Department of Basic Education:

www.education.gov.za

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CONTACT US

For more information please contact Social Surveys:

2 Upper Park Drive, Forest Town, Johannesburg 2193

tel +27 11 486 1025

email info@socialsurveys.co.za

www.socialsurveys.co.za



Knowledge is power. But understanding is everything.