SCHOOL DROP-OUT IN SOUTH AFRICA:
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 facts and figures on drop-out from school in South Africa, and outlines who is most vulnerable to leave school before completing Matric. It also provides suggestions for improving learners chances of staying in school.

This fact sheet, the first in a series of five, is based on the findings of 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. The study began with in-depth conversations with educators, caregivers and youth in urban and rural communities on the difficulties that youth face in remaining in school. In late 2007 Social Surveys travelled across all the provinces of 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.

FACTS

- *The Access to Education study shows that almost all children aged 7 to 15 are in school (98.8%).*
- *BUT: 10% aged 16 to 18 years are OUT of school.*
- *Generally, youth stay in school for many years BUT many leave school before completing Matric. Only 38% of youth aged 19 to 25 have Matric/NTC III while 17% were still in school (GHS 2007).*
- *Learners in South Africa do not move efficiently through school. Many learners experience school delays, caused mainly by repetition (see Factsheet 4: Grade Repetition in South Africa).*

WHAT OUR RESEARCH SAYS ABOUT WHY CHILDREN DROP-OUT

WHO IS MOST VULNERABLE?	WHY?
Youth over the age of 16 and youth in the Further Education and Training phases *(Grades 10 to 12)*.	• Older youth are more vulnerable to engaging in risky social and sexual behaviour, which makes them more vulnerable to drop out caused by factors such as pregnancy. • The curriculum might become too difficult for learners in the Further Education and Training phase because the quality of their foundational education was poor.
Youth who have repeated grades a number of times and are struggling academically: 10% of youth aged 16 to 18 left due to repetition and difficulties associated with being older than their classmates.	• Being much older than one's peers may lead to feelings of low self-esteem and exclusion *(see Factsheet 5: Over-age Learners in South Africa)*. • Youth who are struggling academically may become discouraged from continuing their education, especially if there is a lack of remedial support in school.
Youth living on commercial farms: almost one in three youths *(aged 16 to 18)* residing on farms is out of school.	• Many children on farms still attend farm schools, and many of these schools do not provide tuition up to Grade 12. • There are opportunities for unskilled labour on farms which discourages school attendance.
Disabled children.	• Disability may affect children's ability to learn and participate fully in the classroom. • It is possible that disabled children experience social exclusion because of their disability. • There may be a lack of supply of appropriately equipped schools for disabled learners.

Coloured youth, especially in the Western Cape: 22% of coloured youth aged 16 to 18 are out of school; and 48% of coloured youth in this age group residing on farms are out of school.	• The reasons are complex, and are linked to conditions in schools in the Cape Flats and surrounding communities, as well as farm communities (e.g. lacking access to good quality education, gangsterism etc.) • Substance abuse amongst teens, especially alcohol and tik.
Children living in poverty-stricken households.	• Poor households may struggle to pay for basic education costs such as uniforms, transport and stationery. • Poverty affects learners' ability to actively participate in their school work e.g. demands of household and caring responsibilities; not having a quiet place to study; going to school hungry which affects concentration; caregivers not being able to help children with homework etc. • Lack of opportunity to access good quality education. • Poorer learners may be socially excluded by the school, other parents and learners (see Factsheet 2: Poverty and School Drop-out in South Africa).
Learners who fall pregnant.	• Child care responsibilities make it difficult to return to school for many young mothers. • Learners who fall pregnant may already be feeling disengaged from their schooling: when teenagers feel a sense of attachment to school and are academically successful at school, they are less likely to fall pregnant (see Factsheet 3: Pregnancy and Access to Education in South Africa).

THE TOP 4 REASONS FOR DROP-OUT IDENTIFIED BY LEARNERS AND CAREGIVERS

1. The general burden of household poverty and cost of education.
2. Teenage pregnancy in the case of girl learners.
3. Disengagement from/lack of interest in schooling, 'mixing with the wrong crowd'.
4. Failing a grade, having learning difficulties or always being behind with school work.

There is no single reason why learners drop-out of school. Respondents reported different reasons, which were often interconnected and complex. For example, a female learner might miss school in the short term because she had to take care of younger siblings. When she arrived back at school she was teased by other learners for not having the 'right' lunch in her lunchbox. She might struggle academically, not receive enough support, and might have failed a grade, so that she would be older than her peers. She might begin to engage in risky sexual behaviour and fall pregnant. Thus dropping out of school is the end result of a complex process.

DISPELLING MYTHS ABOUT DROP OUT

- Drop-out from school is **not** a common phenomenon for children and youth aged 7 to 18. Only 1.2% of children aged 7 to 15 are out of school and 10% of youth aged 16 to 18 are out of school. But there are still low levels of Matric completion. **Many youth drop out after the age of 18, in the FET grades (10 to 12).**
- Most children are remarkably determined to complete their Matric.
- With the introduction of no-fee schools and fee exemption polices, school fees are no longer creating a barrier for the majority of children. However, other access costs such as the cost of uniforms and transport are problematic for poverty-stricken households.

WHAT MIGHT HELP CHILDREN TO STAY IN SCHOOL?

While there are no simple solutions to preventing dropout, there are 'supporting interventions' that can be provided within the school environment and at home that would improve learners' chances of staying in school.

What can government do?

- Improve the quality of education, especially in primary schools to ensure that learners are well equipped to handle the curriculum in Grades 10 to 12.
- Provide access to a broader set of alternatives to main-stream schooling that would improve youth's chances of finding a job and would provide pathways for learners struggling with mainstream academic schooling (e.g. artisanship, learning-by-doing approaches etc.).
- Increase access to secondary schools in farming areas.

- Interventions regarding substance abuse are needed (especially alcohol and tik).
- Focus on bringing down access costs such as the cost of uniforms, rather than fees.

Investigate further the reasons why disabled children are particularly vulnerable to being out of school. Evaluate the impact of the inclusionary education policy on disabled learners' access to schooling.

What can educators and principals do?

- The more learners feel engaged and involved in their schooling the less likely they are to engage in risky social behaviour *(including substance abuse and unprotected sex)*: offering additional tutoring and extracurricular activities *(e.g. sports, drama and cultural clubs)* creates a sense of belonging. If these cannot be provided in school, it may be possible to connect with an existing youth centre or projects.
- Over-age learners can be an asset to the school. Engage over-age learners in becoming active in their schools by taking on leadership positions or mentoring younger learners.
- Get caregivers and learners involved in making the school an attractive place to be in. This might be as simple as painting the school, developing a garden or vegetable patch.
- Make school a comfortable place for caregivers to talk to educators and principals, enabling them to be more involved in their children's education.
- Offer support to pregnant girls and young mothers to increase their chances of returning to school *(see Factsheet 2: Teenage Pregnancy and Access to Education in South Africa)*.

What other initiatives are needed which can be supported by community organisations, NGOs and CSI initiatives?

- **Support to learners:** provide drop-in centres after school to support learners with homework, tutoring programmes, extracurricular activities, interventions regarding substance abuse, support to pregnant girls/young mothers etc.
- **Support to caregivers:** provide parenting programmes, adult (basic) education and training – there is a strong connection between parental education and learners sense of empowerment, repetition and drop-out.
- **Support to schools:** provide programmes that improve the skills of educators/school officials *(including subject knowledge, management skills, and conflict resolution/communication)*.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF STAYING IN 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

Penreach an NGO, offers school development programmes to improve the skills of educators and their schools in Mpumalanga and surrounding areas.
www.penreach.co.za

The **SHAWCO Centre** offers a comprehensive "All Round Tutoring Education programme", implementing academic, life skills, IT and extra-curricular activities.
www.shawco.org

Equal Education is a movement of learners, parents and teachers working for quality and equality in South African education.
www.equaleducation.org.za

RELATED LINKS

Social Surveys:
www.socialsurveys.co.za

Department of Basic Education:
www.education.gov.za

SPECIAL THANKS

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A F R I C A

Knowledge is power. But understanding is everything.