



INCLUSIVE SOCIETY INSTITUTE

Op-ed

SOUTH AFRICA'S EDUCATION STANDARDS HAVE NOT COLLAPSED. THE EVIDENCE SAYS SO.

By Daryl Swanepoel

Every January, as matric results are released, South Africans seem to have the same argument. The pass mark is too low. Matric has been dumbed down. Standards have collapsed. Universities are turning away qualified students because there simply are not enough places. Our schools, we are told, are producing certificates that mean less and less each year.

The conclusion is usually the same: South Africa's education system has failed.

It is an understandable conclusion. Many parents have experienced overcrowded classrooms. Many teachers work under impossible conditions. Too many children still leave school without the knowledge and skills they deserve. The inequalities between well-resourced and poorly resourced schools remain among the greatest in the world. None of that should be denied.

There is, however, another factor that is often missing from this debate. Since 1994, South Africa's population has grown by more than 50 per cent. Every year, hundreds of thousands of additional children must be accommodated in classrooms, taught by qualified educators and supported through an already stretched education system. Any fair assessment of educational performance must therefore ask not only whether outcomes have improved, but whether the system has managed to expand while maintaining standards. That is a far more demanding test than public debate usually acknowledges.

But neither should we ignore what the evidence actually tells us.

The Inclusive Society Institute's latest *True South Africa* report on education set out to test one simple proposition: has South Africa's education system truly collapsed, or has public perception run ahead of the facts? The findings challenge much of the conventional wisdom.

Perhaps the biggest misconception concerns the matric pass itself. Ask almost anyone what is wrong with matric today and the answer will quickly come: "You only need 30% to pass." The statement is repeated so often that it has acquired the status of fact. It is also misleading.

The National Senior Certificate is not a single pass-or-fail examination. It is a tiered qualification. A Higher Certificate pass, a Diploma pass and a Bachelor pass each require progressively higher levels of

achievement and open progressively wider opportunities for further study. Judging the entire system by the minimum requirement in one subject ignores how the qualification actually works.

More importantly, the data shows that increasing numbers of learners are not merely scraping through. The proportion achieving Bachelor-level passes has increased markedly. In 2008, Bachelor passes accounted for 20.1% of all National Senior Certificate passes. By 2024, that figure had risen to 47.8%. Diploma passes have also remained a major pathway, accounting for 28.3% of passes in 2024. The lowest possible NSC outcome, by contrast, accounted for only a small minority of passes. In other words, the system is not merely producing more passes; it is producing more passes that matter.

That matters, because if standards had genuinely collapsed, one would expect the proportion of learners qualifying for university entrance to fall over time. The opposite has happened. More young South Africans are leaving school with qualifications that open the door to higher education than ever before.

Ironically, this success has created a new challenge. As larger numbers qualify for university admission, competition for limited places has inevitably intensified. For many families, that competition feels like exclusion. But the two are not the same. University participation among black South Africans aged 20 to 24 increased from 11.1% in 2002 to 21.6% in 2022. Among coloured South Africans it rose from 10.7% to 14.2%. Although participation among Indian/Asian and white South Africans declined - from 49.7% to 39.1% and from 63.4% to 43.1% respectively - both groups continued to participate at rates substantially above the national average. As the report notes, these declines are best understood as reflecting changing post-school choices and financial dynamics, rather than diminished access to higher education.

The same pattern is visible beyond matric.

Educational attainment across the population has steadily improved. In 1996, only 2.9% of black African adults aged 20 and older held diploma-, degree- or above-level qualifications. By 2024, that had risen to 10.2%. Among coloured South Africans, the figure rose from 4.1% to 10.7%. Among Indian/Asian South Africans, it increased from 9.4% to 25.1%. Among white South Africans, it rose from 21.3% to 37.7%. Put differently, among black African adults the probability of holding such a qualification improved from about one in 34 to one in 10; among coloured adults, from one in 24 to one in nine; among Indian/Asian adults, from one in 11 to one in four; and among white adults, from roughly one in five to nearly two in five.

None of this means South Africa's schools are performing as well as they should. Far from it.

Too many learners still struggle to read for meaning. Too many schools lack adequate infrastructure. Teacher shortages exist in particular subjects and provinces. Educational outcomes remain closely linked to geography, income and the quality of individual schools. For many children, the opportunities available at birth continue to shape the opportunities available in adulthood. These are serious challenges.

But serious challenges are not the same as systemic collapse.

Indeed, one of the dangers of the collapse narrative is that it obscures where real progress has been made. If every improvement is dismissed as statistical manipulation or declining standards, then public debate loses its ability to distinguish between what is working and what still requires urgent reform.

Evidence should not be used to defend failure. It should be used to identify it accurately.

The education system has unquestionably produced too many disappointing outcomes. But it has also produced millions more school leavers, more university-qualified young people and significantly stronger matric outcomes than the public conversation often acknowledges. Those achievements should not be dismissed simply because they coexist with serious weaknesses.

There is another reason why proportionality matters.

If South Africans convince themselves that the education system has already collapsed beyond repair, then reform begins to appear futile. Why improve something that no longer functions?

The evidence suggests a different conclusion.

South Africa's education system is under considerable strain. It is uneven. It is often inefficient. It continues to reflect the deep inequalities of our society. But it also remains capable of improvement. That is an important distinction.

Countries whose institutions have genuinely failed do not steadily expand educational attainment or produce growing numbers of learners meeting higher academic thresholds. Countries under pressure can still do both, even while confronting enormous structural challenges.

The purpose of evidence is not to tell us that everything is well. It is to tell us where we stand, so that reform is directed by reality, rather than rhetoric. South Africa's education system requires better management, stronger accountability and sustained investment in quality. But none of those reforms begin by convincing ourselves that the system has already failed. They begin by recognising that it still possesses the capacity to improve.

The choice before us is therefore not between pretending everything is fine and declaring everything broken. It is between despair and realism.

Despair tells us nothing can be fixed. Realism recognises both progress and failure. It acknowledges institutional weaknesses while identifying the foundations on which further reform can be built.

That is the conversation South Africa needs. Not because our education system has arrived where it should be, but because it has not collapsed where many imagine it to be.

Daryl Swanepoel is the Chief Executive Officer of the Inclusive Society Institute. This article draws on the Institute's True South Africa Evidence Series, Data. Context. Perspective., and in particular its report on Education in South Africa.