



Celebrating the Matric Class of 2025

Takunda Muchuweni: a shining light for learners with special educational needs

By Johnathan Paoli



Resilient: Takunda Praise Muchuweni is South Africa's top National Senior Certificate candidate among Learners with Special Education Needs for the Class of 2025. (Photo: Jan Kriel School Facebook Account)

When Takunda Praise Muchuweni speaks about her matric year, she does not begin with her results or the trophies she won.

She begins with pain: physical, constant, and unavoidable; and the quiet battle to keep believing in herself when her body seemed to be working

against her.

“The most difficult part of my year was battling self doubt and being in real physical pain. I had to

write exams while sick, and I was wondering whether I would be physically able to make it,” Muchuweni told *Inside Education*.

Muchuweni, a matriculant from Jan Kriel School in the Western Cape, has been named South Africa’s top National Senior Certificate (NSC) candidate among Learners with Special Education Needs (LSEN) for the Class of 2025.

Her achievement places her among the country’s most exceptional matriculants, not only for her academic performance but for the resilience and leadership that have defined her schooling journey.

For Muchuweni, the road to national recognition was marked by challenges far beyond the pressures of final examinations.

Living with muscular dystrophy and limited mobility following major spinal surgery in Grade 6, she navigated her final school year while paralysed from the neck down and reliant on a wheelchair.

Chronic pain and recurring illness accompanied her daily, even as she prepared for three-hour examination papers.

“It was demotivating to put

“Remain consistent and work a little each day. Small steps lead to big results.”

—
Takunda
Muchuweni’s
advice to the
matric class of
2026

in all the work and get the strength to go to school, and then when you sit for the exam, you are hit with sharp pain. You have to focus and write for three hours with a smile on your face when you are just racked with pain,” she said.

Yet Muchuweni refused to allow her circumstances to dictate her outcome. Matric, she said, was unpredictable and mentally exhausting, but persistence became her anchor.

“There were a lot of days when I was in pain and a lot of days when I felt like giving up. But I just kept going despite all of that,” Muchuweni said.

Her story has resonated across the education sector, challenging persistent stereotypes about disability, academic ability, and leadership.

Jan Kriel School, a specialised institution in Kuils River supporting learners with physical disabilities and learning barriers, has been central to that journey, providing a framework where high expectations are matched with comprehensive support.

Muchuweni’s academic excellence has been consistent rather than sudden.

Over the years, she has repeatedly ranked among the school’s top achievers, earning the Dux Learner trophy, subject awards in Business Studies and Mathematical Literacy, and the Principal’s Award.

In 2025, she was elected Chairperson of the Representative Council of Learners, a role that placed her at the centre of learner advocacy and leadership.

Her leadership extended beyond the school gates.

In 2024, Muchuweni served as a Junior City Councillor for the City of Cape Town, where she led a plastic recycling initiative that raised funds for a local school.

The project earned her the Nest Leadership Project Award and reinforced her belief that young people with disabilities should be visible in decision-making spaces.

“I want to see more people in my situation represented and involved in making decisions that affect us,” she has said, calling for greater inclusion of learners with disabilities in leadership programmes and civic platforms.

That sense of purpose was shaped early in her life. In July 2019, while in Grade 6, Muchuweni underwent major spinal cord surgery: a defining moment that temporarily confined her to a hospital bed and drastically altered her physical abilities.

Despite this, she continued her schooling with the support of occupational therapists, physiotherapists, facilitators, and teachers, maintaining strong academic performance even while undergoing rehabilitation.

She draws inspiration

from Jan Kriel alumni who have gone on to excel in higher education and professional life, seeing in their stories proof that disability does not limit potential.

Her own support system has been extensive and deeply personal.

She credits her parents, sister, educators, school counsellor, psychologist, and medical team at Red Cross Children’s Memorial Hospital for sustaining her through years of physical strain.

During examinations, she was assisted by a transcriber, while therapists worked closely with her to manage fatigue and pain.

Rather than viewing her disability as a limitation, Muchuweni believes it has reshaped how she approaches learning and problem-solving.

“Because some things are difficult for me to do, I’ve learned to think creatively and work closely with others,” she said.

She described adaptability as one of her greatest strengths.

Her achievements were recognised on a national stage at the NSC Top Achievers Breakfast hosted

by MTN, where she joined South Africa’s highest-performing matriculants.

She was also invited to the Basic Education Department’s Ministerial Matric Awards in Gauteng, an honour reserved for just 44 learners nationwide.

Jan Kriel School described her achievement as historic, noting that it reflects both individual determination and the power of inclusive education.

The Western Cape Education Department confirmed that the province achieved a 91.9% LSEN matric pass rate in 2025, with the second-highest bachelor’s pass rate nationally for LSEN candidates at 60.4%.

Looking ahead, Muchuweni plans to pursue tertiary studies at the University of Cape Town in 2026, with interests spanning psychology, industrial psychology, and law; fields rooted in her desire to understand human behaviour and advocate for others.

Despite facing multiple university rejections, she has remained resolute, currently appealing and reapplying following her recognition as a top achiever.

Her mother, a cum laude master's graduate, remains her strongest role model and source of inspiration.

When asked what principle guides her intellectual and emotional resilience, she said: "The quality of everything we do depends on the thinking that we do first."

To the Class of 2026, her advice is practical and unromantic, shaped by lived experience rather than platitudes.

"Remain consistent and work a little each day. Small steps lead to big results," she said.

She also urges learners not to lose themselves entirely to pressure.

"Matric is a roller-coaster. Just keep on going, keep on believing in yourself and don't forget to enjoy the moments you can," she urged.

Muchuweni's journey stands as a powerful counter-narrative to defi-

cit-based views of disability in education.

It is a story not of overcoming disability, but of succeeding because of resilience, community, and opportunity; and of redefining what excellence looks like in South Africa's classrooms.

As she steps into the next chapter of her life, Muchuweni is not only celebrating academic success but also her future.



Persistent: Takunda Praise Muchuweni has a chat with Western Cape Education MEC David Maynier. (Photo: Jan Kriel School Facebook Account)

Floods, a cash crunch and staff shortages couldn't stop KZN from topping the 2025 NSC results

By Thapelo Molefe



Top marks: Minister of Basic Education Siviwe Gwarube, top achiever for public schools Abigail Kok and Deputy Minister of Basic Education Dr Makgabo Reginah Mhaule at the announcement of the 2025 matric class top achievers. (Photo:Kopano Tlape/GCIS)

KwaZulu-Natal overcame years of financial pressure, damaging floods and persistent staffing shortages to finish as South Africa's top-performing province in

the 2025 National Senior Certificate results with a 90.6% pass rate — up from 89.52% in 2024.

It overtook the Free State for first place and also delivered six of the

country's top 10 districts, including uMkhanyakude, one of South Africa's most rural areas.

Last year was a turbulent one for education in the province.

Severe floods damaged school infrastructure in several areas, compounding long-standing budget pressures that have limited the department's ability to appoint teachers, repair facilities, and procure learning and teaching support materials.

By March, the KZN Department of Education had already overspent its budget, triggering partial administration and urgent interventions by the national government.

The province's leadership credits its performance to a deliberate focus on disadvantaged schools and sustained commitment from educators, learners and parents across socio-economic divides.

"We have a plan, which we call the academic improvement plan, with six pillars," according to KZN Department of Education head Dr Nkosinathi Ngcobo.

"It's a simple plan that is followed by all our schools, which gives strategic guidance on what needs to be done.

"We shut out the noise, but we listen to our critics, and we improve. In fact, they are the fuel that fuels our passion and our resolve to turn around the narrative that achievement is the preserve of the privileged."

—
KZN Department
of Education head
Dr Nkosinathi
Ngcobo.

"We are focusing on rural and township schools unapologetically, in terms of assisting them with resources and support," he said.

The strategy, he said, was beginning to yield visible results across the

province.

"Our rural districts are performing even better than some of the districts which are in urban areas across the country," Ngcobo said.

"uMkhanyakude District is in one of the deepest rural areas, but it's in the top two in the country. It's the fruit of our focus on previously disadvantaged schools."

He said the department's emphasis on no-fee schools was informed by where the bulk of learners are located.

"We realised that this is where the majority of learners are — the Quintile 1, 2 and 3 schools — and that is where support must be directed," Ngcobo said.

Ngcobo acknowledged that financial pressures remained the department's most persistent obstacle, with far-reaching consequences across the system.

"When you have financial challenges, you can't appoint staff, you can't repair infrastructure on

time, and even your audit outcomes are affected because you don't have managers in place," he said.

"When you separate them, it looks like many challenges, but in fact it's one challenge with many facets."

Despite these constraints, Ngcobo said the province had leaned heavily on its human capital.

"Despite the limited resources that we have, the main resource we have is our teachers," he said.

"No one would expect that we would be number one in the country under these conditions, but it's focus, focus, focus."

He added that criticism of the department had been used as motivation rather than a distraction.

"We shut out the noise, but we listen to our critics, and we improve. In fact, they are the fuel that fuels our passion and our resolve to turn around the narrative that achievement is the preserve of the privileged."

Private-sector and civil society partnerships also played a role in supporting schools. Ngcobo cited organisations such as the National Education Collaboration Trust and VVOB among several partners working with the department.

"There are many partners from the private sector who have taken an interest in the KZN Department of Education, and we share this success with them. They have contributed to where we are today," he said.

KwaZulu-Natal MEC for Education Siphosihle Hlomuka echoed this view, attributing the results to collective effort rather than isolated pockets of excellence.

"The main reason is the commitment from our educators, the officials at the district and head office level, our learners and their parents," Hlomuka said.

"Education is a social challenge. It needs everyone to work together."

Hlomuka said the fact that

six KZN districts ranked in the national top 10 showed that improvement was spread across the province.

"It's not about one district. It's about education across KwaZulu-Natal," he said.

The national NSC pass rate was 88%. Basic Education Minister Siviwe Gwarube said this was evidence that "excellence" was becoming entrenched in township and rural schools. She noted that more than 66% of bachelor's passes were achieved by learners from no-fee schools, including districts such as uMkhanyakude and Umlazi.

"Poverty is not destiny," Gwarube said, adding that strong districts and sustained support were key to narrowing historical performance gaps.

Focus on improving schooling, not the 30% pass mark debate

By Mathanzima Mweli

Every year during the matric results season, the so-called “30% pass mark” debate reignites, capturing headlines and fuelling protests. The concern that 30% should not be enough to pass a subject has a strong emotive appeal at first glance, but there are three major problems with this line of critique.

First, it is based on and perpetuates a myth that standards have been lowered and were higher at some point in the past when our education system was better.

Second, the alternative proposal to raise the matric pass criteria to 50% in at least six subjects is a very bad idea, if you stop and think about what will happen.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, debates about the pass criteria distract us from discussing what actually needs to be done to improve the quality of teaching and



Faulty critique: Mathanzima Mweli, Director-General of the Department of Basic Education, says raising the pass mark may offer the illusion of action, but it avoids the real work needed to raise standards, particularly in the early years. (Photo: Eddie Mtsweni)

learning in our schools. Let me explain each of these three key points.

The myth of lowered

standards

When critics lament things like slipping standards or lowering the bar, they usually imply or state explicitly that

the standards have been reduced. But this is simply false.

Firstly, it is important to note that the criteria for obtaining the National Senior Certificate are more complicated than “you just need 30%”. In reality, the NSC requires six subjects to be passed, with three at a minimum of 40% and the others at a minimum of 30%.

While the exact combination of criteria changed somewhat in 2008, this change did not amount to a clear lowering of standards. In fact, under the old Senior Certificate system, learners could pass certain subjects at a “Lower Grade” level, which required only 25%. But there was never a time in South African history when 50% was required for all subjects to pass matric.

A related myth is that universities are now receiving weaker candidates who scraped through with just 30%. In fact, there are other, more stringent criteria for university admission.

About 84% of those who passed matric in 2024 also met the more stringent diploma pass criteria, and the criteria for bachelor-level admission require even stricter standards. Specific

university courses may also apply additional selection criteria, such as a score of at least 50% in both mathematics and physical science.

“Okay,” you might say, “Even if standards weren’t higher in the past, shouldn’t they be?”

The fallacy of raising the pass mark

The desire for higher standards is understandable. But higher standards are achieved through better learning, not by redefining failure. Simply increasing the pass criteria will not miraculously improve the quality of learning and teaching across South African classrooms.

This would be like telling a high jumper to just raise the bar as a way to improve their performance, rather than doing the hard work of exercise and improving their technique.

But more than being merely ineffective, a dramatic change in the pass criteria would do real harm. Why do I say this?

Raising the NSC pass requirements to 50% in at least six subjects would inevitably lead to two highly undesirable outcomes:

1. Massive educational exclusion: Roughly half of current matric candidates would pass under such a system, dramatically reducing the number of young people with a qualification. This would be deeply unfair to future generations of youth, result in widespread unhappiness, increase dropout rates in earlier grades, and cause significant disruption to the labour market. Under a 50% threshold, hundreds of thousands of learners, disproportionately from poorer provinces, would fail matric each year, not because they learned less than before, but because the rules changed.

2. Lowering of standards: It may take a few years, but because of pressure on the system to avoid mass failures, exam difficulty would inevitably have to give. A level of knowledge that previously earned 30% would now earn 50%, rendering the pass mark change a symbolic farce. Ironically, changing the pass criteria would lead to grade inflation and the actual lowering of standards. Moreover, universities and employers would lose a valuable range of results to differentiate between candidates.

Instead of achieving its intended goals, raising the pass mark would compromise the credibility of the NSC and worsen the sorting of learners into post-school education pathways.

A strategic focus on fundamentals

The obsession with pass mark thresholds distracts from the real challenges in South Africa's education system. While the percentage of youths completing matric has improved, too many children still exit the education system without achieving an NSC pass or equivalent qualification at a college, and educational inequality remains unacceptably high.

Higher standards are achieved through better learning, not by redefining failure.

—
Mathanzima Mveli

The more sustainable solution lies in strengthening the foundations of learning so that more children are equipped to write the NSC examinations and take key subjects like mathematics and physical science.

This is the strategic shift being pursued by the Department of Basic Education, and which many academics and critics have been calling for: Instead of obsessing over the matric pass rate or pass criteria, the focus is on better quality early learning.

We need to give more children access to well-functioning Early Learning Programmes to improve school readiness. We need to ensure better teaching of reading and literacy in and through Home Language in the early years of school. We need to improve the numeracy foundations children learn in primary school so that more learners are equipped to take mathematics in matric.

Changing the quality of education across thousands of classrooms is not easy. It requires the right guidance for teachers, support materials, and in-service training and monitoring. In a resource-constrained environment, we must invest in specific

forms of support that have been proven to raise learning outcomes.

A balanced approach Incremental

adjustments to pass requirements could be considered, such as introducing an average pass mark of 40%. However, these changes must be coupled with the development of alternative educational pathways, such as the rollout of the General Education Certificate at the Grade 9 level, and better opportunities at TVET colleges.

Drastic changes, like a sudden increase to a 50% pass mark, would either exclude vast numbers of learners or force a lowering of standards. Neither outcome is acceptable.

Raising the pass mark may offer the illusion of action, but it avoids the real work. If we are serious about standards, we must be serious about teaching and learning, especially in the early years. That is where real improvement begins, and where the future of South Africa's education system will be decided.

Mathanzima Mveli is the Director General of the Department of Basic Education

A dream come true: York High learner Abigail Kok tops 2025 NSC

By Lebone Rodah Mosima

Abigail Kok, an 18-year-old matriculant from York High School in the Western Cape, was honoured as the Top Learner in the 2025 National Senior Certificate (NSC) at an awards ceremony held at the Mosaïek Theatre in Fairlands, Johannesburg.

In her vote of thanks, Deputy Minister of Basic Education Reginah Mhaule said the recognition marked another milestone in celebrating South Africa's most promising young achievers in the basic education sector.

Speaking moments after receiving her awards — which also included Top National Achiever in Quintile 5 schools and



Abigail Kok, an 18-year-old matriculant from York High School in the Western Cape (Photo: Eddie Mtsweni)

Top National Achiever in Physical Sciences — Kok described the moment as “completely surreal”.

“To be perfectly honest, this is a bit of a dream come true,” she said.

Abigail received seven distinctions, with her highest marks of 100% for accounting and 99% for physical science and

mathematics. She also achieved 100% for Life Orientation.

While the accolade represents a major achievement, Kok admitted she is still reflecting on what it might mean for her future.

“I have absolutely no idea right now. I don’t

know if it’s going to open job opportunities,” she said.

Kok plans to study at Stellenbosch University in the Western Cape and intends to pursue data science, having initially registered for actuarial science.

Explaining her decision to change course, she



Speaking moments after receiving her awards — which also included Top National Achiever in Quintile 5 schools and Top National Achiever in Physical Sciences — Kok described the moment as “completely surreal”. (Photo: Eddie Mtsweni)

said actuarial science is largely focused on mathematics, statistics and risk, with career paths mainly in insurance and banking.

“Data science still involves maths and statistics, but also computers, and I really enjoy working with data,” she said.

“That’s why I want to make the change — it can be applied across many industries and still includes a strong maths component.”

Originally from the Eden District in the Central Karoo, Kok described her matric year as both demanding and rewarding.

She took English, Afrikaans, Mathematics, Physical Sciences, Life Sciences, Accounting and Life Orientation, relying on early preparation, mind maps and a strict study timetable.

“My only tip would be to

start early,” she said. “Don’t procrastinate, and make an effort to understand your work instead of learning it like a parrot.”

Family support played a crucial role in her success. Kok said her parents fostered a strong learning environment from an early age and encouraged balance through weekly hikes to help manage stress.

At school, she credited her teachers for motivating her to go beyond the curriculum and for their constant encouragement and support.

Despite her achievements, Kok admitted that perfectionism was her biggest challenge during exams.

“I tend to overthink things,” she said.

“My biggest challenge was learning that my best is good enough — and it’s something I’m

still getting used to.”

Reflecting on her matric year, which she described as her “nicest year”, Kok encouraged the Class of 2026 to embrace the experience.

“Your first term is solid, but by term two you’re already preparing for exams, with terms three and four being almost entirely exam-focused,” she said.

“Matric is a lot of work. Enjoy the last chance you have to be a child — because after that, you’re no longer a child.”

The event underscored the importance of recognising young achievers not only for their academic excellence, but also for their potential to inspire others — something Kok’s achievement clearly embodies.

The matric class of 2025 provide inspiration and encouragement

By Thapelo Molefe



*Well done! President Cyril Ramaphosa has congratulated the matric class of 2025.
(Photo: Esa Alexander/pool photo via AP)*

In January, the Minister of Basic Education announced that the matric class of

2025 had made history by achieving the highest pass rate in our country's history. More than

650,000 learners passed the National Senior Certificate, achieving a pass rate of 88%.

We congratulate all the learners and their teachers, families and communities for this great achievement. We applaud every learner who sat these exams.

The matric results have shown a steady improvement over many years, both in the quantity and the quality of the achievements.

They have contributed to a dramatic increase in the number of South Africans older than 20 who have a matric qualification, increasing from 30% in 2002 to 52% in 2024.

This outstanding achievement shows the value of the investment we are making in education and the efforts we have made to ensure that all children, regardless of their background and gender, have access to quality education.

Global experience has shown that one of the

most effective ways to reduce poverty is to ensure that girls receive a good education.

It is therefore significant that in 2025, more girls sat for the matric exams than boys, and that the pass rates of boys and girls were much the same.

A higher proportion of girls attained admission to bachelor studies than boys, and nearly twice as many obtained distinctions. This bodes well for the continuation of their studies at universities and colleges.

It is also significant that more than two-thirds of all bachelor's passes came from schools in the most disadvantaged communities, classified as quintiles 1-3.

This is both a testament to the determination of these learners and their teachers, and to the effectiveness of policies like no-fee schools and the child support grant.

Taken together with the expansion in recent years of funding for tertiary students from poor backgrounds, these results give us encouragement that many of these young people will be able to lift themselves and their families out of poverty.

We are encouraged by the fact that 90% of learners with special education needs passed matric and 52% achieved bachelor's passes, both higher than the national average.

Our task is now to ensure that more learners with special needs are able to write matric exams.

As we applaud these great results, we must acknowledge that challenges remain.

Of the 1.2 million children who started Grade 1 in 2014, only 778,000 made it through to Grade 12 in 2025.

That's nearly half a

million young people who left school before finishing. As we strive to improve the quality of our matric results, we must work harder to ensure that more children complete their schooling.

Another challenge is the drop in performance in subjects like mathematics. While more learners are taking these subjects, we have seen a drop in the pass rates for mathematics and accounting. These are subjects that our learners need to excel at if they are to succeed in a rapidly changing economy.

In working to address these challenges, we are starting with the foundations of learning. In the same week that the results came out for the class of 2025, the class of 2037 started their first day of Grade 1.

From this moment, they are starting their preparations for matric and beyond. That is why

we are placing greater emphasis and making more investment in the early years of schooling.

We have made Grade R compulsory and embarked on an ambitious drive to register and provide

subsidies to more early childhood development centres. We are strengthening early grade reading, improving teaching materials and focusing on teacher development in the early grades.

By investing in children at the start of their school career, by giving them a solid educational foundation, we are preparing them for success. We are working to ensure that they all finish their schooling, that they excel in matric and that they go on to thrive in everything they do.

The achievements of the Class of 2025 must inspire and encourage all the years of learners that are to follow.

“Global experience has shown that one of the most effective ways to reduce poverty is to ensure that girls receive a good education.”

—
President Cyril Ramaphosa

The silent crisis: How early learning failure derails SA's future

By Thapelo Molefe



No compromise: Basic Education Minister Siviwe Gwarube told the Basic Education Sector Lekgotla in January that “foundational literacy and numeracy are the canvas for national development” (Photo: Eddie Mtsweni)

In 2014, approximately 1.2 million children entered Grade 1 across South Africa. By 2025, twelve years later, only 778,000 reached matric. Nearly half a million young people, 422,000 learners,

vanished from the system before completing their schooling.

They did not simply drop out in Grade 12. Most left between Grades 10 and 11, exhausted, discouraged,

and convinced they had no future. But government officials gathering at the Basic Education Sector Lekgotla in January say the real moment of failure happened years earlier. Not in a high school

classroom, but in a creche, a Grade R class, or a Grade 1 numeracy lesson that a child simply could not grasp.

“If we fail our children during this critical period of birth to nine years, we fail them throughout the education journey,” Basic Education Minister Siviwe Gwarube told the lekgotla on its opening day.

It was a warning rooted in evidence that this year’s gathering, its theme focused on “Strengthening

Foundations for a Resilient and Future-Ready Education System”, represents less of a policy summit and more of a national reckoning.

The connection between early childhood development and everything that follows — matric passes, university throughput, skills shortages, unemployment — has long been whispered in education circles. In January, it moved to the centre of the national conversation.

President Cyril Ramaphosa spent time at the lekgotla doing something unusual for a sitting head of state: arithmetic.

He recounted visiting the Kruger Mpumalanga International Airport and asking young managers basic operational questions.

“How many passengers come here? How many planes land here? Do you know the population of your province? Do you know the population of your country?” The answer



Basic arithmetic: President Cyril Ramaphosa told the lekgotla that “what we now need to focus on [in education] is what the economy needs”. (Photo: Eddie Mtsweni)

each time was silence or fumbling.

“You cannot manage what you cannot count,” Ramaphosa told them. “You cannot manage it.”

It was a seemingly simple observation that cut to the heart of South Africa’s crisis. If young people in managerial roles cannot confidently work with numbers, cannot understand the world numerically, then the nation has failed them not at matric, but far earlier. And if this happens at scale, it ripples through the entire economy.

The numbers are devastating. Of the 1.2 million Grade 1 learners from the 2014 cohort, only 778,000 (65%) reached matric in 2025, while 422,000 (35%) left school before completing their education. Of those who reached matric, 88% passed (more than 650,000 learners), the highest pass rate in South African history.

But only 34% of 2025 matric candidates wrote mathematics; most chose

mathematical literacy instead. Of those taking mathematics, only a fraction achieved the 60% threshold required for university STEM programmes.

The 88% matric pass headline reads as a success: South Africa’s matric pass rate has climbed from around 50% three decades ago to 88% today. But beneath the surface, the pipeline is fractured beyond recognition.

“What we now need to focus on is the quality outcomes,” Ramaphosa said. “What we now need to focus on is what the economy needs.”

The economy needs engineers, scientists, doctors, technicians, and skilled workers. Instead, it is receiving school-leavers without confidence in mathematics, without foundational numeracy skills, and often without the conceptual clarity necessary to engage with complex, technical subjects.

And it begins much earlier than most people realise.

Gwarube identified a specific inflection point, which is Grade 4.

“More children must read and read for meaning by Grade 4,” she told delegates.

“Foundational literacy and numeracy are not just an education priority. They are the canvas for national development. Without it, higher-order learning cannot occur.”

Grade 4 is where the system typically transitions from “learning to read” to “reading to learn”. It is where abstract mathematical thinking becomes necessary. And it is where, historically, learners without strong early foundations begin to visibly struggle, the so-called “Grade 4 slump”.

The evidence, presented across multiple sessions at the lekgotla, suggests that this slump is not inevitable. It is a design failure rooted in how children are taught from the moment they enter formal schooling.

When the department analysed learners exposed to mother-tongue-based

We need to ensure that learners complete their schooling.

—
President Cyril Ramaphosa

bilingual education (teaching in home languages through Grade 3, with progressive English introduction), the results shifted dramatically. Children taught mathematics and science in languages they understood — isiZulu, Sesotho, isiXhosa — showed greater conceptual clarity and confidence than peers taught entirely in English.

The implication is uncomfortable: for decades, South Africa has been teaching complex abstract concepts to young children in a language many do not yet fully command. It is equivalent to teaching calculus to an English speaker in Mandarin. The failure is not the child's; it is

systemic.

“Mother tongue-based bilingual education is not a compromise on excellence,” Gwarube stated. “It is a pathway to excellence.”

But this intervention cannot happen in Grade 4. It must begin in Grade R and Grade 1, in the foundational phase that government documents now describe with unusual urgency as the “bedrock” of everything that follows.

South Africa's early childhood development sector has long been neglected. For years, ECD meant informal creches where children “played and slept many hours and played with rocks and stones”, as Ramaphosa put it with notable candour.

Only recently, in the fifth and sixth administrations, did the nation begin a serious conversation about early learning as a deliberate, cognitive investment rather than mere childcare.

“We delayed, inordinately delayed, to start vigorously with early childhood

learning,” the President acknowledged.

“We thought somehow getting our children to attend creches ... that that was learning. Now that, as we all know, did our country and our young people a bad service.”

By the end of 2025, nearly 12,000 schools had access to mother-tongue-based bilingual education. But that represents less than half of South Africa's roughly 25,000 schools. The majority of the nation's 13 million school-age children still pass through early learning environments that, by the government's own assessment, have failed to adequately prepare them.

The result is that children entering Grade 1 are already behind. By Grade 4, when abstract reasoning becomes necessary, children struggle. By Grade 8, lacking confidence in foundational subjects, children begin to disengage. By Grade 10, facing the reality of matric mathematics or science, these children often leave.

This is not a metaphor. This is a documented pattern affecting nearly half a million learners over a single twelve-year cohort.

The lekgotla's discussions around retention and dropout rates revealed a painful secondary crisis, which is gender-specific patterns of departure from the system.

Ramaphosa highlighted equity gains: more girls than boys wrote the 2025 matric exams, with similar pass rates, and a higher proportion of girls qualified for bachelor's studies. Nearly two-thirds of all bachelor's passes came from schools in disadvantaged communities, classified as quintiles 1 to 3.

Yet progress at the top obscures the crisis in the middle. Girls without strong early foundations are more vulnerable to dropping out, particularly around the ages of 15 to 17. Teenage pregnancy, often a consequence rather than a cause of school disengagement, provides the final push.

For boys, the pattern differs slightly but is equally troubling: boys without early numeracy and literacy confidence are more likely to self-exclude, believing they "cannot do" academic subjects.

Both pathways lead to the same endpoint: young adults without matric, without employable skills, and without access to the further education necessary to change their trajectory.

"We need to ensure that learners complete their schooling," Ramaphosa emphasised, invoking the image of a protective hen ensuring her chicks remain close.

"Leave no one behind should not just be a political slogan. It must mean that those whom we are responsible for should not be left behind."

Yet the system has been leaving children behind systematically — 422,000 in a single cohort — and the roots of that abandonment are planted in the early years.

Despite knowing what works, South Africa struggles with implementation at scale. Dr Stephen Taylor, Director of Research, Coordination, Monitoring and Evaluation at the DBE, explained that while structured literacy programmes, quality learning materials, and intensive teacher coaching produce proven results, scaling these interventions across 25,000 schools remains extraordinarily difficult.

Teacher preparation compounds the problem; universities train generalist teachers while the system demands specialists in literacy and numeracy.

The lekgotla commissions proposed concrete solutions. An Early Childhood Development Blueprint outlines 23 actions targeting universal access to quality ECD by 2030, with a national orchestration team to coordinate implementation.

For foundational learning, recommendations include establishing common instructional approaches

across all schools within two years, developing numeracy benchmarks currently lacking, and training 80% of system officials in curriculum and instructional leadership within three years.

Mother-tongue-based bilingual education represents a critical intervention. A national pilot running from 2026 to 2030 will scale MTBBE across 200 rural schools, with Grade 5 functioning as a continuation phase rather than an abrupt transition to English.

Teacher professional development must shift from generic to specialised preparation, with universities modelling the bilingual pedagogies they teach.

The economic stakes could not be higher. Minister of Science, Technology and Innovation Blade Nzimande emphasised that no country achieves developmental goals without investing in science, technology and innovation capabilities.

Yet South Africa

produces insufficient STEM graduates while facing acute shortages in engineering, software development and skilled trades. Without strong foundational numeracy and literacy, learners avoid mathematics and science, creating a cascade effect that undermines the entire pipeline from schooling to employment.

The linkage is clear: early childhood development shapes foundational phase success, which determines subject choice confidence, which influences matric outcomes, which offers post-school opportunities,

which determines labour market participation and ultimately drives economic growth or stagnation.

Of the 1.2 million children who entered Grade 1 in 2014, 422,000 might never complete their schooling. Each child represents human potential constrained by preventable systemic failure. Each failure represents lost economic productivity, lost innovation, lost possibilities for personal transformation.

The lekgotla concluded with timelines, success indicators, and specific recommendations.

Whether these translate into actual investment, coordination, and sustained focus will determine whether South Africa arrests its education crisis or continues to watch 422,000 learners per cohort fall through the cracks created decades earlier.

South Africa's education leadership has made clear that the time to act is now.

“If we fail our children during this critical period of birth to nine years, we fail them throughout the education journey.”

—
Basic Education
Minister Siviwe
Gwarube

Anxiety, debt and exclusion: The hidden cost of starting university in South Africa

By Charmaine Ndlela



New beginnings: Students starting a new phase of their lives at universities and colleges need support and guidance at a time when they are vulnerable. (Photo: Supplied/Facebook)

The transition into higher education is often framed as an exciting milestone — a step toward independence, success and a better life. Yet for many students in South Africa, the academic year begins not with celebration, but with anxiety and uncertainty.

As universities open for a new year, students are confronted with multiple pressures at once: complex online reg-

istration systems, academic exclusions, NSFAS rejections, accommodation shortages and financial strain. For many, particularly those fresh out of high school, it can be difficult to navigate these demands without clear guidance.

For first-year students, registration is often their first encounter with university bureaucracy. What should be a supported process can become chaotic and isolating.

Students frequently turn to Student Representative Councils (SRCs) for help, expecting advocacy and practical support. But many report that SRCs are most visible during registration, yet ineffective, and at times exploitative, when students are most vulnerable.

This is particularly concerning for newcomers who are unfamiliar with procedures and still adjusting to campus life. Universities should monitor how

support is provided during registration and ensure students are protected from abuse, gatekeeping and neglect.

For many students, university is not only personal hope, but a family investment. Those from disadvantaged households often stretch bursary allowances to help support siblings at home, adding pressure to already fragile circumstances.

Securing funding, accommodation, food and registration simultaneously can take a serious toll on mental health. Increasingly, students are airing their frustration online, warning that their academic journeys may be derailed before they properly begin.

One Tshwane University of Technology (TUT) student, appealing an academic exclusion, asked anonymously whether death certificates could be used to support their case. Another expressed panic after waiting months for NSFAS academic and financial data to be processed. At Rhodes University, students reported delays in receiving required propensity letters, a crucial document for NSFAS appeals.

The emotional weight of these experiences is evident. Some students are expected to prepare for supplementary exams while coping with rejection letters, financial uncertainty,

and depression. As one student put it bluntly: “Schooling is a scam.”

For students without funding, the struggle extends beyond academics. Hunger, debt, and unstable housing are daily realities. Many attend lectures on empty stomachs, spend nights hungry while roommates cook, and endure the shame and pain of poverty in silence.

A University of the Free State (UFS) student asked how others had survived without funding, and admitted to deep depression and uncertainty about whether to continue studying. Another said that they would rather “die in Bloemfontein

“Until students are met with real support, fairness, and dignity, higher education will continue to fail those it promises to uplift.”

trying” than stay home without hope.

Accommodation challenges further worsen the transition. Late NSFAS payments, mid-year defunding, unsafe private housing, and limited residence spaces have plagued students for years, with conditions seemingly deteriorating annually.

Landlords take advantage of vulnerable students who are desperate for accommodation, but these cases of sexual assault are sometimes not reported by students because they fear they will be left homeless and cannot afford court procedures.

Students across institutions, including TUT, UFS, Rhodes, University of Fort Hare, Wits, Boston College, and others report administrative delays, unclear communication, and systems that prioritise fees over academic progress. Some students are unable to register due to outstanding debt or missing documentation, while others face the reality of full modules, forcing them to extend degrees beyond the funding period allowed by NSFAS.

One student shared how a full year module added two extra years to what was meant to be a three-year degree — a devastating outcome when funding is scarce.

Speaking to *Inside Education*,

Bonolo Maphanga a returning student at Boston College studying for a diploma in business management, shared how stressful registration has strained her academic preparations.

“I had to come to Boston College offices because when I tried it online, it needs some form of a payment but I’m funded by a bursary so I had to come here to sort it out because I don’t have any form of payment for myself.”

Maphanga added that she lives in another province and had to borrow money for transport to come to Johannesburg to sort out her application. “Now I have to take another bus going back home because I don’t have accommodation or anyone I know to accommodate me until February,” she said.

The psychological impact of this transition cannot be ignored. According to the Council on Higher Education, a significant number of students fail to complete their studies, with dropout rates particularly high in the first year. Mental health challenges, financial stress, and lack of support are major contributing factors.

While universities do offer support services — such as counselling centres, peer intervention programmes, food kitchens, and meal assistance schemes — many students are

either unaware of these services or unable to access them in time.

Despite record numbers of 345,000 learners who achieved Bachelor’s passes in Matric 2025, university capacity remains limited.

Higher Education Deputy Director-General Sam Zungu says universities only have space for about 230,000 students, leaving over 100,000 students who can’t be accommodated at public universities.

The University of Johannesburg reported 450,000 applicants for only 11,200 spaces for the 2026 academic year.

This leaves thousands of hopeful students without a placement, reinforcing inequality, frustration and dreams shuttered.

An unplanned gap year often leads to depression and anxiety, as individuals may feel stuck, unproductive, and uncertain about their future. Spending long periods at home without clear goals or structure can result in frustration, low self-esteem, and a sense of hopelessness, which may eventually manifest as negative or unhealthy behaviour.

Education remains one of South Africa’s most powerful tools against poverty and unemployment. But for it to truly

serve its purpose, students must be supported not only in classrooms, but through compassionate systems that recognise their realities.

Universities should actively listen to student concerns and involve them in shaping policies that affect their academic experience.

These approaches ensure that while time may bring clarity, universities actively shorten the distance between confusion and success by meeting students halfway.

Student support, in any form, brings hope to those who feel hopeless and provides a clearer understanding of the academic process. A mind that races without answers grows weak and exhausted, but proper guidance restores confidence, focus, and the motivation to succeed.

Education should empower, not exhaust. Until students are met with real support, fairness, and dignity, higher education will continue to fail those it promises to uplift.

Competition Commission will prosecute over excessive uniform prices

Trouble coming for those who do not comply with Commission guidelines and the Competition Act

By Johnathan Paoli

The Competition Commission has warned that it is preparing to prosecute schools and uniform suppliers that continue to flout competition guidelines, after more than a decade of complaints from parents about excessive prices driven by exclusive supply agreements.

“When we find prices are excessive, this is often also coupled with the finding that the school would have had an exclusive supply agreement with a particular supplier,” said Competition Commission analyst and legal secretary Mpho Moate.

While the Commission is unable to set or publish a benchmark price for school uniforms, Moate said the volume and consistency of complaints leave little doubt

about the underlying problem.

Between 2020 and 2025, the Commission received 490 complaints related to school uniforms and learning materials and resolved 465.

Moate said complaints continue to flow in, showing the persistence of the problem.

Parents have raised suspicions that some schools may receive financial benefits from preferred suppliers, but Moate said that the Commission has not found evidence to substantiate those claims.

In response to widespread complaints, the Commission published the Procurement of School Uniform and Learning Material

Guidelines in 2021.

The guidelines promote pro-competitive procurement practices and are aimed at school governing bodies, parents and schools. They discourage exclusive supply arrangements entered into without transparent tender processes and encourage the appointment of multiple suppliers and the use of generic uniform items.

The guidelines emerged from a 2017 investigation into numerous schools and uniform suppliers for potential abuse of dominance and restrictive vertical practices.

The investigation found that long-term exclusive agreements substantially lessened competition and



Clampdown: The Competition Commission is determined to put an end to the unfair pricing of school uniforms. (Photo: X)

forced parents to pay inflated prices. According to the Commission, the guidelines have had a measurable impact. A

national survey conducted in 2022 found that almost 90% of participating public and independent schools were aware of the guide-

lines, with many indicating that they had begun implementing them.

However, some schools

cited challenges such as the voluntary nature of the guidelines, lack of awareness, weak enforcement and limited capacity.

Monitoring compliance remains a major hurdle, given the large number of schools across the country.

To address this, the Commission is developing a new monitoring tool in collaboration with the Department of Basic Education.

The tool will collect data directly from schools on uniform suppliers, prices and procurement practices.

“We are hoping that we will issue this tool sometime this year. We are also banking on the relationship and the collaboration that we have with the Department of Basic Education to assist us in this regard,” Moate said.

The Commission said the data gathered will help identify noncompliance, excessive pricing and the exclusion of small and medium suppliers from the uniform market.

To date, the Commission has avoided punitive measures against schools,

preferring settlements and undertakings over litigation.

Moate said this approach was taken to avoid dragging schools into costly legal battles.

In 2017, the Commission reached settlement agreements with several prominent independent schools and large uniform suppliers, requiring them to comply with the Competition Act and the guidelines.

More recently, public schools that were the subject of complaints have been asked to sign undertakings committing to limit supplier contracts to five years or less and to follow competitive procurement processes in future.

Schools are also encouraged to reduce the number of unique or branded items on their uniform lists in favour of generic items that parents can buy from multiple retailers.

However, the Commission says patience is wearing thin.

“Given the number of outreaches and initiatives that we have done with

the schools and within the school uniform market, unfortunately, the Commission now is at a point where we are going to prosecute schools and suppliers who do not comply with the guidelines as well as the Competition Act,” Moate said.

He added that in at least one or two cases, parties that previously settled with the Commission appear not to be adhering to their commitments.

The Commission stressed that it does not regulate prices directly, but that competitive markets are the most effective way to bring prices down.

Parents, school governing bodies and suppliers are urged to report suspected anti-competitive conduct via the Commission’s WhatsApp line or official complaint channels.

Ultimately, the Commission said, affordability depends on collective action.

University or TVET? Inside South Africa's two-lane road to a career in engineering

By Levy Masiteng



Hands-on training. Students at the Motheo TVET College in Bloemfontein in the Free State get to grips with the nuts and bolts of an engine.. (Photo: Supplied)

For thousands of South African students each year, the road to a career in engineering does not run straight from matric to university. Instead, it zigzags through waiting lists, funding shortfalls, rejection letters and, increasingly, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges.

As debates about the affordability, relevance and outcomes of higher education intensify, students who have moved between universities and TVET colleges are offering a ground-level view of how engineering education stacks up — especially when cost is factored in.

At the centre of the discussion is a growing realisation that engineering is not a single pathway, but a broad field entered through different institutional routes, each with its own strengths, weaknesses and price tag.

According to Varsitywise, universities and TVET

colleges are built on distinct educational philosophies. Universities focus largely on academic and theoretical training and require a bachelor's pass in matric. Engineering degrees typically take three to four years to complete, often followed by postgraduate study or professional registration before graduates are fully employable.

TVET colleges, by contrast, emphasise hands-on, practical skills designed to prepare students for specific occupations. Many engineering programmes allow entry with Grade 9 or higher, widening access. Courses are generally shorter — between 18 months and three years — and many colleges offer mid-year intakes, reducing the waiting period faced by many matriculants

applying to universities.

Students interviewed by *Inside Education* said cost plays a decisive role when choosing where to study, particularly when finances are tight.

The fee gap between universities and TVET colleges is stark. University engineering degrees can cost tens of thousands of rand a year, excluding accommodation, textbooks, transport and living expenses, although bursaries are available.

The University of the Free State (UFS), for example, estimates engineering course fees at R68,310 in the first year, R52,430 in the second year and R54,400 in the final year. Accommodation costs about R39,580 a year for a single

room and R35,560 for a shared room.

By comparison, TVET colleges are widely regarded as more affordable. The government subsidises up to 80% of tuition, and NSFAS funding is available to qualifying students. Fees are often charged per module or trimester, making costs easier to manage for students without stable funding.

Prudence Matlhatsi Lubisi, a Mechanical Engineering student at Tshwane North College, said she found relief in the TVET system after years of uncertainty.

"I initially applied for Mechanical Engineering at university, but the response took too long, so I decided to go with TVET instead of delaying my studies," she said.



Respected: The offices of the engineering faculty at the University of Pretoria. (Photo: Photo: X)

Lubisi said she spent four years at home after applying to university, unsure of her future. When she applied to a TVET college, she was accepted within two weeks.

Her course runs for 18 months. She pays R650 per module, taking four modules per trimester — R2,600 per trimester in total.

“Sometimes I use NSFAS, and other times I pay out of pocket,” she said. “University fees are much higher, and it would be difficult to afford everything without support.”

Her experience is increasingly common. Many students are moving from universities to TVET colleges after finding the cost, pace or academic demands of university education unsustainable.

Sfiso Mashaba, now studying Engineering Graphics and Design (N3) at Motheo TVET College in Bloemfontein, began at UFS, where he was enrolled in a three-year BSc degree majoring in Physics and Chemistry.

“The course was tough, and the tuition and accommodation costs were difficult to manage,” he said. After repeating some modules, Mashaba lost his bursary — a turning point.

“At varsity, if you lose funding, everything collapses at once,” he said.

At Motheo, Mashaba discovered that some of his university modules could be recognised, allowing him to complete just one remaining module before moving into practical training.

“If I had known I didn’t have to spend three years repeating the same modules and delaying employment, I would have gone to Motheo much earlier,” he said.

According to Motheo TVET College, annual tuition ranges from about R10,000 to R24,000, depending on the programme — a fraction of what Mashaba paid at university.

Beyond costs, students consistently pointed to differences in curriculum focus. University engineering programmes are often described as theory-heavy and research-oriented, while TVET programmes prioritise technical competence and practical exposure.

“At university, you theoretically know engineering,” Mashaba said. “At college, you actually do it.”

Another student added: “TVET is better because it deals with skills. When you have a skill, no one can take it away.”

A University of Pretoria student framed it this way:

“Engineering is a field with many technical departments, while an engineer is someone with the skills to perform technical tasks.”

For many, the appeal of TVET lies in how quickly those skills translate into employment. TVET qualifications are often directly linked to occupations such as electrician, fitter and turner, or IT technician, allowing graduates to enter the labour market — or start businesses — sooner than many university graduates.

The government has also stepped up efforts to promote TVET colleges. Higher Education and Training Minister Buti Manamela recently rejected claims that the post-school system is in crisis, blaming an entrenched “university-only” mindset.

“The narrative that the only option after matric is university is creating a sense of crisis,” Manamela said while briefing the media on readiness for the 2026 academic year.

He noted that South Africa’s post-school education and training system has about 535,000 planned and funded spaces across universities, TVET colleges, community colleges, skills programmes and workplace-based learning.

“We should not fall into the trap of training 1,000 lawyers



Building the future: South Africa can integrate both universities and TVET colleges to build an engineering workforce that is skilled, employable and economically relevant. (Photo: Vecteezy.com)

simply because there is demand,” he said, calling such thinking “populism rather than rational planning”.

Manamela insisted TVET colleges are “not residual options” but a central pillar in addressing unemployment and skills shortages.

Despite these endorsements, challenges remain — particularly for students hoping to move between TVET colleges and universities.

Research presented at the 2018 Education and New Developments conference in Budapest highlighted persistent articulation problems between the two systems. The study, by Bruce Graham, D.B.

Lortan and Savathrie Maistry, identified “epistemic injustice” in relationships between TVET colleges and higher education institutions.

Limited understanding of articulation pathways by staff often gives students false expectations about progression. However, the research confirmed that established pathways, including credit transfer, do exist — especially for students with older National Accredited Technical Education Diploma qualifications moving into universities of technology.

Researchers argued that stronger collaboration and clearer communication are needed.

Lubisi remains optimistic. “I do plan to further my studies at university after completing my TVET course,” she said. “Especially to grow academically and expand my opportunities.”

Beyond structural barriers, students said stigma continues to shape choices.

“We are controlled by the stigma of varsity life,” said one university student. “People think varsity means intelligence, but employers want experience and skills — something you get from TVET.”

TVET researcher Njabulo Mabaso echoed this sentiment in a Facebook post last year, arguing that many university

programmes are no longer responsive to economic needs.

“The economy needs job creators more than job seekers,” Mabaso wrote. “With an N Diploma and a trade test, you can start a business, work in industry or lecture at a technical college.”

His comments sparked debate. Some agreed, while others cautioned against oversimplification.

“It depends on the course,” wrote Emkay Mokoena. “You can’t compare TVET colleges and universities in healthcare.” Odirile Moeketsi noted that many occupational programmes sit at NQF Level 4, making university

progression unavoidable for certain careers.

Still, perceptions appear to be shifting. “The problem is that some think TVET colleges are for failures,” wrote Kagisho Malese Chukudu. “But skills allow you to contribute as an employee or entrepreneur.”

What emerges from students’ experiences is not a simple contest between TVET colleges and universities, but a complex ecosystem where cost, time, skills and opportunity intersect.

For students running out of time, funding or patience, TVET colleges often offer a second chance — or a faster route into engineering.

“If you can’t afford university and don’t have funding, TVET becomes your option,” Mashaba said. “And it’s not a bad one.”

With government urging a shift away from a “university-only” mindset and students sharing their lived realities, the real question may no longer be which pathway is better, but how South Africa can better integrate both to build an engineering workforce that is skilled, employable and economically relevant.



Multifaceted: Engineering is not a single pathway, but a broad field entered through different institutional routes. (Photo: Vecteezy.com)

IEC steps up youth-focused drive to rebuild voter participation and democratic culture

By Johnathan Paoli

For The Electoral Commission of South Africa (IEC) is intensifying its efforts to directly engage young people, positioning youth participation as central to the future health of the country's democracy amid long-term declines in voter turnout and growing political disillusionment among younger citizens.

Speaking to *Inside Education*, IEC deputy CEO Mowethu Mosery said the Commission had deliberately shifted its focus towards schools, universities and youth outside formal education, recognising that first-time voters and future voters are overwhelmingly found in this demographic.

“Young people carry the bulk of your first-time voters. Your new voters are in this age group, and your future voters are also in this age group. For us, talking to South African citizens before they reach voting age, and as they enter voting



Democracy in action: The IEC Free State team conducted voter education and on-site registration at Ntsu Secondary School in the Dihlabeng Municipality. (Photo: X/IEC)

age, is critical to encourage continued participation in our democracy,” Mosery said.

The IEC's youth strategy was anchored in a broad civic education programme that

ran from April to September, deliberately timed to avoid clashing with end-of-year examinations.

While the programme is not new, Mosery said the Commission had decided to use the non-election year to deepen engagement rather than rely on short, campaign-style interventions closer to voting periods.

“We said, since it’s not an election year, let’s give ourselves sufficient time to interact with the youth,” he said, describing the initiative as an opportunity to build a sustained democratic culture rather than chase last-minute registrations.

A key pillar of the strategy is the School Democracy Programme, rolled out

in partnership with the Department of Basic Education.

The IEC works with schools to reinforce civic education already embedded in the curriculum, covering the Constitution, national symbols, governance structures and the role of citizens in a constitutional democracy.



Beyond classroom content, learners are exposed to mock voting exercises, giving them a tangible sense of how elections work.

Mosery said the experience had proven unexpectedly powerful.

“When we went into schools, the young people below the voting age got to go through a mock voting process. Having ink on their thumbs was all the excitement. They were taking selfies and saying the experience was good for them,” he said.

At tertiary institutions, the approach shifts towards debate and discussion.

The IEC encourages open forums on topical political issues, creating space for students to express frustration with the state while also engaging with democratic processes.

“There were robust views and robust exchanges of ideas. Matters of discomfort around the state and the work of the state were voiced, but overall, there was enthusiasm. Young people appreciated having a platform to share their views,” Mosery said.

The Commission is also extending its reach beyond schools and universities to include out-of-school youth

and young professionals entering the job market. Mosery said this group often falls through the cracks of traditional civic education, despite being politically affected by decisions on jobs, service delivery and economic policy.

Underlying the IEC’s strategy is an acknowledgement that youth voter participation has been on a downward trend for more than a decade.

Research conducted by the Commission points less to apathy and more to disillusionment and lack of trust in politics.

“We see that it points more to disillusionment than opportunity. Many young people want nothing to do with politics, but if you engage them, you find they do want to do something; they’re just not sure whether voting is that something,” Mosery said.

As a result, the IEC has consciously shifted away from negative or fear-based messaging, instead focusing on positive, action-oriented communication aimed at rebuilding trust.

“Our messaging needs to create hope. When you make a statement, it must be intended to encourage and call people to action,”

Mosery said, adding that social and youth activism are increasingly important entry points for democratic engagement.

The Commission is also adapting its methods to account for differences in access between urban and rural youth.

While overall participation trends are similar, Mosery noted that access to information and digital platforms creates uneven opportunities.

“In areas with better access to information, online services are more prevalent,” he said.

This has informed the IEC’s push for online registration tools and mobile registration units, which it refers to as “mutation stations”, to reach young people who are digitally connected as well as those in more remote communities.

Looking ahead, the IEC is exploring further electoral innovations, including expanded use of technology and long-term discussions around forms of e-voting, while emphasising that transparency and trust must remain paramount.

For now, Mosery said the immediate task is social rather than technical.

Gauteng school crisis: How thousands of learners started 2026 without classrooms to go to

By Thapelo Molefe



Warning: Gauteng Education MEC Matome Chiloane said reports that foreign nationals were being prioritised over South African learners were “misleading and unfounded” and that any school or official found contravening admissions policies would face consequences.(Photo: X)

When Gauteng schools opened on 14 January 2026, thousands of learners had nowhere to go. By the third week of term, approximately

2,700 children remained without placements, a crisis concentrated in Johannesburg East and Ekurhuleni that left parents exhausted, children distressed, and

serious questions about the province’s capacity to educate its youth.

Before schools opened, the Gauteng Department of Education reported

a 98.5% placement rate, but the remaining 4,858 unplaced learners represented thousands of families facing an uncertain start to the academic year. Johannesburg East alone struggled to place over 1,000 Grade 8 learners.

As the crisis unfolded, rumours circulated suggesting foreign nationals were being prioritised over South African learners. Gauteng Education MEC Matome Chiloane dismissed the claims as “misleading and unfounded”, warning that any school or official found contravening admissions policies would face consequences. “No school is permitted to prioritise foreign national learners ahead of South African learners,” he said.

Writing in the *Daily Maverick*, Dr Nathan Ferreira, a lecturer in the Department of Inclusive Education at the College of Education, University of South Africa, said: “The GDE cites ‘high-pressure zones’ as the root cause, but critics argue that

chronic underinvestment and poor forecasting perpetuate this annual crisis. Township schools are already overcrowded and cannot absorb the influx of learners from informal settlements and new housing developments.”

For affected families, the weeks of uncertainty came at a steep cost: lost learning time, strained finances, and shattered trust in a system meant to serve them.

Boitumelo Morobane, a Krugersdorp mother, followed every step the system required. She applied during the official July 2025 window, carefully selecting two high schools in her area. One was a feeder school linked to her child’s primary school, a choice that should have made placement straightforward.

Months passed without any response from either school. When Morobane contacted the district office seeking clarity, officials sent her from “pillar to post” with no resolution.

A placement notification eventually arrived, but for a school she had never applied to, one she describes as having a troubled reputation.

“We raise our kids to become better citizens, but instead our government pushes them to be mixed with ill-mannered kids,” she said. “This government has failed in everything they do.”

A Fourways father who works at the Johannesburg Central SAPS found himself in a similar nightmare. Despite applying early for his child to attend Fourways High School, the nearest school to both their home and his workplace, the system placed the child at Northriding High School instead.

During the first week of term, determined to find answers, he woke at 2am and began a frustrating journey through the bureaucracy. He moved from office to office, only to be told at the head office that officials could merely check the system and

confirm what he already knew.

“We applied very, very early,” he said. “But they decided, no, we are not placing your child there. We are placing your child at Northriding High School.”

Officials told him Fourways High was full and offered only one option: wait 10 days for possible movement on the waiting list, with no guarantees.

The distant placement created impossible logistics for the working father. A spot at Fourways High would have allowed a simple morning routine, dropping his child at school before heading to Central SAPS. The Northriding placement shattered that possibility entirely.

“Now you find that the school at which the child is placed is far from where you are staying,” he explained.

“We want the child to be placed nearer to where we

are staying. Because it’s easy for us. When we wake up in the morning, we just drop the child off, then we come to work.”

The department’s inflexibility left him exasperated.

“They don’t want to understand. That’s the challenge that we are facing,” he said.

“*It’s an inconvenience, yes. But we also need to acknowledge, and parents need to acknowledge, that we are pressured in Gauteng.*

—
Gauteng
Department of
Education
spokesperson
Steve Mabona

“Parents end up taking the children to the private schools. What is that? We can’t afford private schools.”

System errors compounded the crisis for some families. A Linksfield Ridge parent had relocated in October 2025 and promptly updated her proof of residence in November, ensuring the department had her correct address on file.

The system ignored the update entirely, placing her child at a school in Kempton Park, a 60km daily round trip that would consume hours and money the family does not have.

“I uploaded my proof of residence already in November. That’s when I got it from my landlord because I moved in October,” she said.

“I’m not going to drive 60kms a day to Kempton Park to go and drop my son at school.”

When she attempted to resolve the issue, officials offered no assistance.

Instead, she encountered hostility that left her feeling victimised by the very system meant to help her.

“We are experiencing bullying because when we do talk to them, they don’t respond to us very well,” she said.

For a Bedfordview mother, the crisis arrived without

warning. Her son had been living with her father in Margate, KwaZulu-Natal, until he fell ill, and the child had to relocate suddenly to Gauteng. There had been no time for a standard application.

Hoping for assistance, she visited the department’s Marshalltown office, only to discover that they only

handle just Grade 1 and Grade 8 placements. For her son’s grade, officials directed her to the Benoni district office, a journey requiring two taxi fares each way.

In a struggling economy, the transport costs alone were crippling, and that was before uniforms, stationery, and other



Space problem: Critics argue that chronic underinvestment and poor forecasting perpetuate this annual crisis. (Photo: X)

school expenses.

“The economy is bad, bad, bad,” she said. “You don’t have that kind of money to be taking one taxi to another taxi, coming back. And you still have to buy uniforms, stationery, all that stuff.”

Phone calls to district offices went unanswered, leaving her trapped in uncertainty while precious time slipped away.

“They don’t answer their phones. They don’t get back to you. And time is going. We need to place him in a school.”

Other parents found themselves caught between institutions, with schools and district offices pointing fingers at each other while children remained in limbo.

One parent described arriving at the district office after being turned away from her chosen school. Officials told her to return to the school and request documentation. At the school, administrators dismissed her, saying they

could do nothing without proof from the district.

“I got to the school. They dismissed me. They told me I need to come here,” she said. “If I don’t have any proof of these people saying I must go to the school, there’s nothing they can do for me.”

At Ekurhuleni district offices during the first weeks of term, the human cost of the crisis was impossible to ignore. Learners in full school uniform stood in queues alongside their parents, ready for classrooms they could not enter.

Some had arrived at their assigned schools on the first day, only to be told their applications had not been processed correctly. Now they waited in administrative limbo while classmates began the year without them.

“We went to school, and they said we must come here to the district because the school application wasn’t submitted through,” one uniformed student said.

“I feel very sad because some of the learners in my class are being educated, while we are falling behind.”

Another learner captured the helplessness many families experienced.

“Time is moving. But we must try and try and try.” Throughout the crisis, Gauteng Education Department spokesperson Steve Mabona acknowledged the pressure on the system while defending the department’s efforts. The fundamental problem, he maintained, was infrastructure.

Gauteng simply did not have enough schools and classroom space for everyone seeking placement.

“Our challenge is capacity. We need to make sure that we have enough schools, enough spaces where we will be in a position to accommodate learners,” he said.

The pressure was concentrated in predictable hotspots: Ekurhuleni

North, Ekurhuleni South, and Johannesburg East, with Tembisa, Kempton Park, Ivory Park, Midrand, and parts of Alexandra bearing the heaviest burden.

Mabona explained that the 10-day waiting period was standard policy. Schools needed time to conduct headcounts and identify learners who had been placed but never arrived.

Only after deregistering those no-shows could they create space for families still waiting.

“After 10 days, then the schools have the right to deregister those who are not coming. Then we create space for those who are coming.”

The department deployed several interventions, including mobile classroom units, accelerated construction of satellite schools, and temporary placements in school halls, libraries, and primary school buildings.

Mabona acknowledged that some schools worsened

the problem by refusing to assist parents directly, instead redirecting them to already overwhelmed district offices.

“It looks like schools are shifting the goalposts,” he said. “We called upon them not to do that.”

Migration into the province added further strain. New applicants arrived daily from other provinces, many having never applied at all.

Economic hardship was also pushing families out of private schools and into a public system already stretched beyond capacity.

While apologising for the disruption, Mabona urged patience and assured parents that catch-up programmes would help affected learners recover lost ground.

“It’s not easy to tell your child that there’s no space, we are still waiting,” he acknowledged.

“It’s an inconvenience, yes. But we also need to acknowledge, and parents

need to acknowledge, that we are pressured in Gauteng.”

The 2026 placement crisis has raised difficult questions about Gauteng’s readiness for growing educational demand.

Migration into the province shows no sign of slowing, and economic pressures continue pushing families from private to public schools. The conditions that produced this year’s chaos appear structural rather than temporary.

For parents like Morobane, who followed every rule, met every deadline, and still found her choices ignored, the experience has left deep scars.

In Pictures



Photos By : Eddie Mtsweni



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