

Weak Planning Impairs Education: The Politics of Improving Learning Outcomes in South Africa

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About this country brief

The RISE Programme is a seven-year research effort that seeks to understand what features make education systems coherent and effective in their context and how the complex dynamics within a system allow policies to be successful. RISE had research teams in seven countries: Ethiopia, India, Indonesia, Nigeria, Pakistan, Tanzania, and Vietnam. It also commissioned research by education specialists in Chile, Egypt, Kenya, Peru, and South Africa.

Those researchers tested ideas about how the determinants of learning lie more in the realm of politics and particularly in the interests of elites. They focused on how the political conditions have (or have not) put learning at the center of education systems while understanding the challenges of doing so.

Each country team produced a detailed study pursuing answers to two central research questions:

- Did the country prioritise learning over access, and if so, during what periods?
- What role did politics play in the key decisions and how?

The full studies detail their analytical frameworks, their data, and sources (generally interviews, government internal documents and reports, and other local and international publications), and the power of their assessments, given their caveats and limitations. Country briefs extract from the full studies how leadership, governance, teaching, and societal engagement are pertinent to student outcomes.

Introduction

Political economy and ideology are important determinants of educational development. South Africa's apartheid legacy, and the predominance of the upper secondary school-leaving certificate, have shaped the policy discourse in ways that often marginalized foundational skills. After 1994, the political urgency of providing quality schooling to the emerging black middle class likely diverted attention from improving the quality of education for the poorest segments of society, despite official policy commitments to serve the poor.

Despite these limitations, South Africa has seen gains in learning outcomes in the last 20 years, driven mainly by improvements among the least advantaged. Yet outcomes remain well below those of other middle-income countries, and several political and nonpolitical factors could impede further gains. Education planning capacity remains weak. The quality of teacher training at universities is poor. The electoral system rewards politicians who respond to popular demands, but such demands tend to focus on very visible phenomena such as school infrastructure and obtaining the grade 12 certificate.

Making learning visible across all primary schools through better system development—and linking information to school accountability in ways that avoid pitfalls in South Africa's recent past—are politically and ideologically charged. The reason? Corruption has adversely affected the schooling system, most noticeably for who is promoted, and the wider erosion of institutions caused by corruption undermines schooling in more insidious ways.

The school system after apartheid

In 1994, an interim constitution was agreed on and democratic elections held. The new constitution, finalized in 1996, created nine provinces based roughly on past boundaries. Schooling was to be run by the provinces, by provincial education ministers known as Members of the Executive Council, with the national minister exercising powers in areas such as curriculum and examinations.

Just before 1994, spending on each white learner was around five times higher than for each black learner.¹ White state schools were given permission to admit black learners before 1994, an opportunity some schools made use of. Private schools, known as independent schools in South Africa today, had been allowed to mix races since 1986, but accounted for just 2 percent of grades 1 to 12 school learners in around 1994.

By the end of the Mandela presidency, there had been substantial demographic shifts in historically white, and Indian, state schools. In historically white state schools in Gauteng, the province encompassing Johannesburg and Pretoria, 31 percent of learners in 2001 were black African, and white enrollment was down to 59 percent.² While formerly white schools only covered around 9 percent of all public-school enrollments, the shifts came with the promise of a more mixed middle class, seen as essential for social stability. In historically black schools, a key change was that apartheid-era salary differentials, based on race, were eliminated in 1995. Essentially, the salary scales that had applied only to white teachers were now applied to all

teachers, pushing up the salary bill for government.³ The teacher unions cemented a system whereby salaries would be determined nationally, even if provinces were the employer.

Two key pieces of legislation were passed in 1996: the South African Schools Act and the National Education Policy Act. The former specified the powers of each school's governing body, where parents form the majority, and the legal status of schools. Crucially, it allowed public schools to augment their spending through the collection of fees from parents, something white parents had advocated strongly. This right, however, came with a duty to run some system of fee exemptions for learners from poorer households.⁴ The second act specified the policymaking and oversight role of the national minister.

In 1998, a new school curriculum, Curriculum 2005, began to be rolled out. It was idealistic and ultimately unpopular, grounded on "outcome-based education," or OBE. It emphasized a departure from the autocratic culture of apartheid schooling, but de-emphasized subject content. The curriculum documents were overly theoretical and impractical. Foreign advisors played a prominent role.⁵

Shortly after 1999, new policies aimed at equalizing nonpersonnel public funding across schools, and the ratio of learners to publicly paid educators. This helped to reduce class sizes in historically black schools, but also pushed up the number of publicly employed teachers. The resourcing changes in the space of a few years have been described as possibly the most ambitious structural changes ever experienced in any schooling system.⁶ With the apartheid legacy of unequal learner funding largely undone, the minister of education, Naledi Pandor, initiated policy changes aimed at improving quality and accountability in schools. She began replacing OBE with greater curriculum specificity, improved access to textbooks, and took the first steps toward an ambitious national assessment system to complement the grade 12 examinations.

Soon after assuming power, President Zuma (2009–18) increased the number of ministries. Education was split into "basic education" and "higher education and training," with two ministers instead of one. The basic education minister, Angelina Motshekga, was appointed in 2009 and in 2021 still occupied this position, making her the longest serving current minister in one portfolio. Under Motshekga, many of Pandor's reforms were taken forward. The Annual National Assessments continued for four years, from 2011 to 2014, after which the unions essentially stopped them. An ambitious "national workbooks" program was launched, providing every learner up to grade 9 with voluminous full-color books. Corruption and nepotism became prominent concerns, leading to an independent inquiry, initiated by the minister, and a report sometimes referred to as the "jobs for cash" report.⁷

Under President Ramaphosa (2018–present), the key change for schools had nothing to do with political intentions, but with the Covid-19 pandemic. The South African government's response has generally been evidence-driven, though increasingly it has prioritized the continued functioning of the economy and schools, rather than restrictions aimed at preventing the spread of the virus. As in almost all countries, the disruptions to schooling have been severe and very worrying.

From socialist vision to stakeholder politics

When the African National Congress (ANC) was unbanned in 1990, its policy positions were largely socialist, with the South African Communist Party (SACP) operating as an influential party within a party. SACP members are expected to be ANC members and the SACP has never participated independently in the elections. The influential Freedom Charter⁸ of 1955 envisaged the nationalization of mines, banks, and large industries. It foresaw free, compulsory, universal, and equal schooling, as a “pure” ideological choice in favor of a highly equal and public schooling system. This implied equalizing per learner public funding, and possibly redistributing teachers in a manner that would disrupt historical patterns of inequality.

Stakeholder politics produced a hybrid schooling system somewhere between the ANC’s revolutionary ideal and apartheid. Public funding per learner was equalized, and even made slightly pro-poor. But historically white public schools were allowed to augment their funding through school fees, the tacit condition being that they open their doors to a substantial number of black learners, especially from the growing black middle class. This arrangement has perpetuated a rather stark and apartheid-like difference between privileged historically white schools and everyone else in one public system.

To avoid having dividing lines exactly like those of apartheid, poverty quintiles, rather than the historical race category of schools, have been used to determine which schools can and cannot charge fees. This led to some dissatisfaction among historically black schools that are considered fee-charging schools, and thus receive less public funding. The arrangement has been complex and messy. Importantly, the distribution of teaching skills was barely affected by the changes. There was virtually no re-allocation of existing teachers, and new teachers essentially chose the schools they wanted to work in. In other words, teachers with a middle-class background, and with the human and social capital advantages that this implies, tended to end up in middle-class schools.

Tensions between expert-driven and more stakeholder-oriented approaches are reflected in the evolution of South Africa’s sample-based national assessment, the Systemic Evaluation. This is a program whose history is worth looking into as it is currently being resuscitated after a hiatus of more than a decade. Unlike the Annual National Assessment, Systemic Evaluation did have a basis in a policy explaining its purpose, albeit briefly.⁹ The first run of the program, in 2001, tested grade 3 learners. The resultant report goes to great lengths to explain how stakeholders were consulted in arriving at a set of indicators.¹⁰ Test results were presented only as mean scores, without proportions of learners achieving specific benchmarks, or descriptions of the meaning of the test statistics for what learners know. A methodologically problematic series of regression analyses arrived at the conclusion that poor school facilities largely explained weak learning in most schools. This may have played a role in the subsequent emphasis on building infrastructure.

The 2004 run of the program, focusing on grade 6, resulted in a more expert-driven report¹¹ of almost 200 pages, which included broad descriptions of learning achievement such as “outstanding” and “achieved”—only 28 percent of learners fell into these two top

categories in the language tests. This report was at pains to explain that correlations between background variables and test results should not be understood as cause and effect.

Unfortunately, with the 2007 run, which focused on grade 3 again, the momentum was lost. Data collection appears to have proceeded as planned, and a short 12-page summary was published, which included some comparisons with the 2001 grade 3 results.¹² However, an envisaged comprehensive report was never released, and political and bureaucratic interest in the program appeared to wane. This was due not to union opposition to the program—unions tend to have no problem with sample-based testing—but to human capacity limitations in the national Department of Education.¹³

Little respect for the rule of law—and weak accountability

Since the first democratic election in 1994, the African National Congress (ANC) has been in alliance with the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and the South African Communist Party (SACP). Such alliances are common the world over and there is nothing inherently wrong with them. But in South Africa, this alliance is widely perceived as a platform for access to state resources in the form of jobs, tenders, and kickbacks.

While systemic corruption is generally seen as having been started under President Zuma, and while he may have perfected it, in truth the roots of these problems preceded Zuma's inauguration in 2009. President Mbeki (1999–2008), a serious student of economics, presided over a relatively prosperous country for much of his term. But under Mbeki, and often under his express order, several disastrous decisions were made, and practices paved the way for the large-scale corruption and inefficiency under Zuma. Paying tithe to the ANC has become standard practice: tenders are awarded and the successful bidders give a cut to the ANC.

Weak accountability has become endemic throughout government. For example, in the 2019 audit report on the state of municipal finances, Auditor-General Kimi Makwetu noted that only 18 municipalities (6 percent of 278) kept their clean audit status. More worryingly, the financial status of 76 percent of municipalities was deemed of concern and requiring intervention, while 92 percent had material noncompliance with key legislation. A journalist reported that Makwetu's frustration was palpable during his presentations, when he repeated his message of deteriorating accountability in municipalities, which either disregarded his findings completely or failed to investigate them.¹⁴

Another example of widespread systemic dysfunctionality lies in the supply of potable water and the treatment of wastewater: By the government's own admission, 56 percent of the country's 1,150 treatment plants are "in poor or in critical condition."¹⁵ Further, 75 percent of 910 municipality-run wastewater treatment works achieved less than 50 percent compliance to minimum effluent standards last year. When water treatment plants fail, the results are palpable: sewerage runs down the streets. When teachers skip class with no consequences, the results are less palpable, but far more damaging to the national skills base in the long term.

Trends in grade attainment and learning outcomes

A steep and continuous improvement in years of schooling was attained between 1980 and 2006, after which improvements continued at a slower pace. What is clear is that participation in schooling took off after the 1976 school uprisings, sparked in Soweto, Johannesburg. These uprisings, largely by secondary school students, prompted the apartheid government to expand schooling, partly as a means of controlling the youth population. The fact that the 1994 transition to democracy is not reflected in any specific change at that point in the trajectory supports Lant Pritchett's argument that the correlation between democracy and the supply of schooling is in general not strong.¹⁶ States often expand schooling for reasons that are not idealistic or altruistic, but based on considerations of the survival of governing elites. The current attainment level, with around 55 percent of youths successfully completing 12 years of schooling, is within the typical range for a middle-income country.¹⁷

The quality gains by South African schools, off an extremely low base, were remarkable over the 1995 to 2019 period. From perhaps as early as 2006, improvements were seen in PIRLS grade 4 reading, and SACMEQ grade 6 reading and mathematics.¹⁸ These improvements, of around 0.07 standard deviations a year for PIRLS 2006 to 2016, and 0.09 standard deviations a year for SACMEQ mathematics 2007 to 2013, are among the steepest one can expect, given what has been seen elsewhere in the world.¹⁹ Yet even after these improvements, South Africa remained an exceptionally weak performer internationally. Pritchett points to South Africa as the most striking underperforming outlier, relative to its general level of economic development among developing countries, with Vietnam as the striking outlier at the top end of the spectrum.²⁰ South Africa's recent improvements have not been sustained long enough to substantially change this pattern.

Educational progress is to a large degree about breaking cycles of intergenerational transfer of privilege and social disadvantage. The school system, by and large, is not doing this, with children attending schools in townships or villages 2–3 years behind their peers in non-township urban areas by grade 5.²¹

Even so, progress is being made. Perhaps the most encouraging feature of the improvements is that they have been driven largely by an upswing in scores among the poorest sections of the population. For example, while the number of bachelor's degree passes has roughly doubled since 2007, increases in the number of bachelor's passes by black Africans accounts almost entirely for the overall improvement.²² Thus, the steady upwards trend in grade 12 scores reflects a narrowing of the country's racial equity gap. And on gender equity, South Africa is well ahead of the curve characteristic of developing countries, with girls outperforming boys on almost every measure at every level of the education system.²³

What is concerning, however, is that TIMSS grade 5, for which tests were first administered in 2015, displays no progress in mathematics between 2015 and 2019. Although this is a trend from just one program, it is a particularly reliable program, and could thus point to a stalling of the upward trend at the primary level.

The Department of Basic Education's five-year plan lays out an improvement trajectory

which is informed by speeds of improvement seen in the fastest performing countries, with South Africa in fact being within this group of countries since around 2002.²⁴ The federal government's 2019 to 2024 five-year plan, known as the Medium Term Strategic Framework and covering all sectors, puts forward targets in line with the DBE plan.²⁵

The prospects for future improvements are fairly good, perhaps of the magnitude seen in the last two decades. But several features of the current system, relating to both the more traditional realm of planning, and to the political realm, pose risks that could undermine progress. Both realms are powerful predictors of progress, and they are very much intertwined. Much of the intertwining and the complexities of each hinge on ideological narratives.²⁶

Improving learning outcomes

The Department of Basic Education (DBE) gives every impression that it is committed to maintaining the centrality of learning outcomes in a context of competing priorities. Commencing in 2015 government, through successive Annual Plans, the DBE has been unequivocally setting learning outcome targets for the system. The 2015 iteration laid the foundation, setting 27 goals, as with:

- Goal 1: Increase the number of learners in grade 3 who, by the end of the year, have mastered the minimum language and numeracy competencies for grade 3.
- Goal 10: Ensure that all children remain effectively enrolled in school at least up to the year in which they turn 15.
- Goal 14: Attract a new group of young, motivated, and appropriately trained teachers to the teaching profession every year.

In addition, mindful of the fact that goals require adequate resourcing, targets were part of a package, including clear curriculum statements, textbooks, and national tests to help teachers teach to the level of the curriculum and measure progress against the goals. These measures provided stability and explicit guidance and support. And it is this policy clarity and systemic support cited by DBE in accounting for the learning gains over the last decade or more: issuing the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements, and monitoring teaching and learning through the National Learning Attainment Strategy.²⁷

In short, government is clear about its intentions to raise the quality of teaching and learning. But several factors inhibit the achievement of these goals, especially the asymmetric relationship between the authority and teacher unions.

Planners and misleading planning instructions

The 10 annual performance plans (APPs) of the 10 education departments dealing with schooling, one national and nine provincial, can be considered as microcosms of planning mistakes and opportunities. The plans, widely known as APPs, are backed by legislation, budgets are justified by them, and they are designed specifically to allow legislatures to hold the executive to account. Their role is to bring together the various strands and silos of the education bureaucracy in the service of the core business of improving learning outcomes. Yet they are widely viewed as weak guides for the

system.²⁸

A key reason is that the instructions behind these annual plans are complicated by ideological undercurrents. Instructions to plan are presented as if their logic were obvious and indisputable. Many planners believe this and respond to the criticism that their plans are incoherent or unhelpful by referring to their capacity problems: If one had more training, or more staff, one could do a better job. The capacity development that planners typically ask for, in areas such as statistics and report writing, is undeniably necessary. But they also need capacity development in less technical, and more political, areas.

Instructions of government departments for the APPs are grounded in the Public Finance Management Act, or PFMA, and were originally a responsibility of National Treasury, essentially South Africa's Ministry of Finance. This responsibility shifted to the new Department of Planning, Monitoring, and Evaluation (DPME) under Zuma. This shift, in turn, reflected dissatisfaction with the fact that under Mbeki there was an emphasis on planning with a strong awareness of budgetary constraints. To put it crudely, the role of economists was seen as too strong. At the same time, the role of the independent Office of Auditor-General expanded, partly due to its growing role in holding government departments accountable for nonfinancial targets. Again crudely, the role of the accountants in planning was on the rise, while that of the economists declined.

Three problems in the APPs stand out: First, plans become unfocused. This is not just a technical problem but a political one. South Africa's plans are commonly accused of being unimaginative and un-revolutionary, which in turn easily leads to the conclusion that they simply perpetuate a neo-liberal agenda. In education, this is a particularly serious problem as good education is so much more difficult to define than, say, access to electricity. The link between improving learning outcomes and tackling South Africa's immense social inequalities should be made far clearer, in every plan.

Second, an excess of indicators on nonfinancial inputs and processes, without a proper sense of the costs and benefits of collecting and processing the data, leads to large volumes of unusable statistics.

Third, the instructions behind the APPs specify that targets should be set through a rational process that considers what is possible. This is perhaps the most glaring sign of the political naivety of these instructions. The political culture in South Africa dictates that politicians must put forward targets that tend to be overambitious. Moreover, politicians enjoy the institutional power to force planners to specify politically driven targets. The only way to conduct professional planning in such an environment is to accept that planners will simply advise politicians on targets, and will devote their efforts to understanding whether there has been sufficient progress toward the target, rather than a pointless analysis of why targets were missed.

Planners with the required technical capacity, and an understanding of the problems with the instructions they are expected to follow, are likely to be in a position to navigate their way to the best possible plan. Such planners would perfect the art of paying attention to some instructions, particularly those relating to the *purpose* of the plan, and

ignoring other instructions, for instance in relation to numbers of indicators or rational target-setting, while being armed with a clear rationale for not following every instruction to the letter. This is what true bureaucratic capacity is about.

Pressures from cabinet colleagues

A key tension any South African national minister of education needs to contend with is that between pressure from cabinet colleagues, and particularly the President, to pursue official education goals, and pressure from teacher unions to satisfy their demands.

What opportunities could a national or provincial minister committed to improving learning outcomes take advantage of? What are the largest obstacles? Successful completion of 12 years of education, either in a school or technical college, is supposed to rise to around 85 percent only by 2030, with the current figure at 57 percent.²⁹ A further positive is that even outside education circles, the importance of focusing on measurable learning, and not just on participation and grade attainment, is widely understood. South Africa's own version of Germany's 2001 "PISA-shock"³⁰ occurred around 2007, with the release of regional SACMEQ test results. Those results pointed to South Africa performing below its neighbors, if one discounts underdeveloped Lesotho and Namibia, whose schooling system was essentially run by South Africa until 1991. Moreover, South Africa performed far below Kenya and Tanzania.³¹ This shattered a certain complacency, and almost arrogance, around South Africa's level of development in Africa.

The difficulty relates to more operational targets, such as those governing school infrastructure, tech innovations, and policy and systems development, as in relation to assessments. An education minister is likely to set overly ambitious targets, but cabinet colleagues are likely to raise them even further. This can be seen as part of a wider political culture in South Africa of looking forward a lot, and seldom looking backward. Put differently, the political costs not promising a lot are high, while the political costs of not attaining service delivery targets are relatively low. While this may be a favorable arrangement for politicians with a poor track record, an effective politician clearly stands to gain from looking backward, being rather explicit about lessons learnt from the past—such as the lessons from the Annual National Assessment (ANA) — and letting this inform the future.

Satisfying teacher unions

The political authority should maintain a careful relationship with the powerful teacher unions, satisfying the demands of teachers while not losing sight of the core aim of improving learning outcomes. This means that teacher salaries should not crowd out other essential inputs, such as spending on materials for learners or on school meals. But the battle between these competing priorities has been won hands-down by salaries.

On conditions of service, those enjoyed by South African educators are comparable with those in Botswana, Malaysia, and Philippines.³² Following years of expansion, the public wage bill for around 1.2-million civil servants takes up almost 40 percent of all state expenditure.³³ Public servant pay escalated much faster than wages in the rest of the

economy, at an average of 7.2 percent a year over 2015–20. In December 2020, government had its decision not to implement the last year of a three-year agreement upheld in the Labour Appeal Court, which ruled that more expenditure cuts would be required elsewhere if government had remained bound by the agreement.

The battle lines are drawn, with public-sector unions demanding a wage increase of the consumer price index plus 4 percent across the board for 2021/2022,³⁴ more than twice the rate of inflation, together with increases in housing allowances, medical aid, and other benefits. Of course, this is a negotiating position, the opening salvo in a process. But on the face of it, these demands are outrageous, coming from a sector which has enjoyed very generous conditions for more than a decade, and did not lose a single job during the Covid lockdown, which pushed some 3 million private sector workers into unemployment.³⁵

Promoting accountability

How could a minister promote primary school accountability? A key section in the South African Schools Act (SASA), the 1996 law governing what schools should do, serves as a flawed, but possible, point of departure. The flaws provide insights into typical problems in the governance of education. The section in question requires every school to submit an annual report on academic performance to the provincial department, and requires the province to assess whether the school is under-performing, in which case the province should formally engage with the school, following certain steps.³⁶ Each year, the provincial head should submit a report to the national minister on underperforming schools. Certainly, at the primary level, these policy prescripts are ignored. Given the flaws in the policy, this is understandable.

The approach could work in a province with, say, 30 schools. But seven provinces have 1,000 or more primary schools. Clearly, the policy needed a sense of scale, and of systems capable of realizing effective governance where personal relationships are not possible. How one generates comparable performance data, and data on the socioeconomic contexts of schools, is a critical question. The section in the SASA is one of many examples of a well-intentioned but impractical policy on improving learning outcomes. There was no attempt to use it, or adapt it, to serve as a basis for the ANA.

Turning to the relationship between education politicians and unions, this has mostly been tense, even in the case of SADTU, despite its being formally allied to the ANC. Paradoxically, national ministers, who have all been from the ANC since 1994, have probably experienced more friction with SADTU than with any of the other, smaller unions. A common narrative, among planners and in the public debates, is that SADTU holds the education authorities hostage, using threats of teacher non-cooperations, and ultimately strikes, to maximize teacher salaries.

There is some truth to this popular narrative, but a further, less widespread, narrative that appears credible is that the hostage theory is used as an excuse for paralysis and inaction in government. SADTU itself will often argue that the employer should stop blaming the union for ill-disciplined teachers, while the employer is not pursuing established disciplinary procedures. The National Development Plan in fact describes poor human resources management by the education authorities as a serious

problem.³⁷

What is rare is engagement by government with unions based on a thorough analysis of the unions' policies and formal commitments. This could be one way of making the relationship more constructive. Education International, the global federation of teacher unions, expresses a fairly clear commitment to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which emphasize better monitoring of learning proficiency. It also expresses the usual reservations about "defining quality education through measurable learning outcomes and test scores alone, mainly focusing on numeracy and literacy."³⁸

This is not a rejection of the measurement of learning outcomes, but an insistence that it should not monopolize the policy debates, which is reasonable. On the related matter of holding schools accountable through universal accountability systems, SADTU has essentially lent support to a new grade 9 national qualification and certificate, an initiative whose data will undoubtedly inform school accountability at the lower secondary level. SADTU is not so much opposed to externally administered testing as to a one-sided emphasis on just this form of assessment, at the cost of an emphasis on assessment for learning,³⁹ which refers to the global formative assessment movement. This movement, and its role in shaping the politics around assessment, seems poorly understood, even by unions, but especially by the education authorities.⁴⁰

Imagining alternative systems of accountability

For school accountability at the primary level, there was a need to find an alternative to the oppressive, and educationally ineffective, school inspectorate of apartheid. And after the ANA experiment, it became necessary to learn from this program's mistakes. While the new Systemic Evaluation is expected to enhance accountability down to the province level, the question remains how the accountability of around 17,000 individual primary schools can be improved.

Though accountability in the schooling system as a broad concept seems popular with some researchers, and among virtually all politicians, interest in clarifying what exactly this concept means in the South African context—in evaluating past attempts to promote accountability, and in envisaging future systems—has been weak. In some ways, even the approach to learning outcomes is superficial. For instance, hardly anyone is asking *why* the improvements seen in the international testing systems occurred.

Apart from union opposition to accountability, which is the reason often put forward for the lack of progress in this policy area, what other factors have played a role? The specifics of accountability in schooling systems can be surprisingly elusive. More clarity from researchers in the past might have assisted the policy debates. While the call for more accountability on the part of individual teachers for learning outcomes is common, this type of accountability is technically extremely difficult and very likely to face union opposition. In contrast, holding school principals accountable is technically doable and politically not that difficult.

One solution to the capacity problem would be more flexible hiring practices in the education departments. Gauteng Province, the industrial heartland of the country, has followed a rather different route than the other eight provinces by putting large numbers

of senior officials on contracts of, usually, five years. Anecdotal evidence suggests this facilitates innovation and accountability in the bureaucracy, though this comes with additional costs as employees are put on higher salary notches to compensate for not enjoying permanent tenure. These practices could in part explain why schools that moved into Gauteng when boundaries were redrawn displayed significant improvements in their grade 12 national examination results.⁴¹

Gauteng Province has also been experimenting with an approach that could serve as a starting point for the country as a whole. District officials who visit schools are equipped with a tablet and software used to assess the ability of a random sample of learners in the school to read aloud.⁴² The data are currently used for planning and as a basis for discussions with school principals. However, there is no formal ranking of schools, and socioeconomic context is not taken into account. In other words, a very informal level of accountability is pursued, which is the only level really possible unless the measures of reading become more rigorous and comparable.

So...

If improvements continue at the rate of the last almost two decades, it would take South Africa another 10 years to reach the level of a typical middle-income country. But several political and nonpolitical factors could impede further gains, and these risks have been magnified by the devastation caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. Politicians and planners need to focus on learning, especially in the early grades. But to what extent are the challenges in the political realm, and to what extent in the more technical realm?

Much of the motivation behind the study of the politics of schooling is a suspicion that it is in the political realm that the most fundamental change needs to occur. One cannot bring about the necessary change by focusing just on the traditional realm of education planning and policymaking. This report has argued that education planning capacity remains weak in South Africa, and that this is a critical obstacle. For instance, improving the quality of teacher training at universities is largely an apolitical task that could be achieved regardless of what occurs in the political realm. True, there is a risk that overambitious political agendas can render capacity building among planners ineffective, because capacity is spread out too thinly. But more capable planners are far more able to push back against overambitious political agendas.

Silo effects in the bureaucracy have made it difficult to make various actors unite around the overriding goal of sustaining improvements in learning. To illustrate, in the planning of teachers, where unions play a large role, a focus on remuneration has tended to crowd out proper analysis of the trade-off between the size of the teacher workforce and pay, in a context of shifting enrollments. The unintended consequence of this has been a continuation of a situation where at the primary level half of learners, mostly the least advantaged, experience class sizes in excess of what the physical classroom was designed to accommodate. The effects of this on the teaching of foundational skills, while under-researched, are presumably significant.⁴³

Many of the obstacles in the political realm are difficult to change. The electoral system rewards politicians who respond to popular demands, but such demands tend to focus

on very visible phenomena such as school infrastructure and obtaining the grade 12 certificate. Learning in the early grades has become more visible due to practices occurring in samples or pockets of the system. How to make this visible across all primary schools through better availability of information, and better systems development capacity—and how to link information to school accountability in ways that avoid pitfalls in South Africa’s recent past—are politically and ideologically charged questions. The paper has analyzed some of the ideological narratives used by contesting elites, and has advocated a more systematic analysis of these narratives. For instance, planners need to understand the more ideological side of the arguments made by unions. However, there are also competing narratives *within* the education planning sphere that need to be properly understood.

Policy analysis, which should include examining underlying and often hidden ideological narratives, needs to become more rigorous. For this to happen, what must improve is the capacity of planners to employ wider analytical frameworks, or systems thinking, and to produce and present statistics. Politicians need to become better at what should be a core concern, ideological discourse, but they also need to become better consumers of statistics. Underpinning their discourse should be a clear understanding of the role of human capital. Education politicians need, first, to have a firm grasp of education system realities in the face of allies in government who often do not understand this system—and second, to be able to build alliances with teacher unions in a context where ideological narratives are complex and influential.

Annex 1 Indicators of learning for RISE countries

A country's learning adjusted years of school combines the quantity and quality of schooling into a single indicator by multiplying the estimated years of schooling by the ratio of the country's score on the most recent test scores harmonized to 625 (World Bank data for latest year of assessment).

Learning poverty, a combined measure of schooling and learning, is the proportion of children unable to read and understand a simple text by age 10 (World Bank data for 2019).

The Human Capital Index is the amount of human capital that children born today can expect to acquire by the age of 18 given the prevailing risks of poor health and poor education. It combines the likelihood of surviving to school age, the amount of school they will complete and the learning they'll acquire, and whether they leave school ready for further learning and work. For example, a score of 0.5 means that they will be only 50 percent as productive as they might be with complete education and full health—and that their future earning potentials will be 50 percent below what they might have been.⁴⁴

| | Learning adjusted years of school | Learning poverty (%) | Human Capital Index (0–1) |
|--------------|--|----------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Chile | 9.4 | 27.2 | 0.7 |
| Egypt | 6.5 | 69.6 | 0.5 |
| Ethiopia | 4.3 | 90.4 | 0.4 |
| India | 7.1 | 56.1 | 0.5 |
| Indonesia | 7.5 | 52.8 | 0.5 |
| Kenya | 8.5 | — | 0.5 |
| Nigeria | 5 | — | 0.4 |
| Pakistan | 5.1 | 77 | 0.4 |
| Peru | 8.6 | 44.4 | 0.6 |
| South Africa | 5.6 | 78.9 | 0.4 |
| Tanzania | 4.5 | — | 0.4 |
| Vietnam | 10.7 | 18.1 | 0.7 |

Note: — = not available.

¹ Gustafsson and Patel 2006. This source explains that between 1991 and 2005, public spending per white learner in the public system declined in real terms by 85 percent. This was achieved largely through retrenching personnel in historically white schools. Crucially, it seems few left historically white schools to move into historically black schools. Most left public teaching altogether. In historically black schools, spending per learner doubled in real terms between 1991 and 2005.

² Chisholm and Sujee 2006.

³ Gustafsson and Patel 2008.

⁴ In 2009, 10 of learners in fee-charging schools were fully exempt from the payment of fees—see Department of Education (2009: 126).

5 Schmidt 2017.

6 Crouch 2005.

7 Department of Basic Education 2016.

8 African National Congress 1955.

9 Regulation 1718 of 1998.

10 Department of Education 2003.

11 Department of Education 2005.

12 The 12-page summary is no longer available on a government website, but is available on the blog of the South African education researcher Nic Spaul: <https://nicspaul.files.wordpress.com/2011/04/doe-2008-systemic-evaluation-grade-3-2007se-leafle.pdf>.

13 Before the 2009 split into basic and higher education, the one department was known as the “Department of Education.”

14 Mailovich 2021.

15 Kretzman et al. 2021.

16 Pritchett 2018.

17 Van der Berg et al. 2020.

18 Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality.

19 Department of Basic Education 2020: 33.

20 Pritchett 2019.

21 Taylor and Taylor 2013.

22 Department of Basic Education 2019.

23 Van Broekhuizen and Spaul 2017.

24 Department of Basic Education 2020: 31.

25 Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation 2020: 81.

26 While the concept of a “theory of change” is generally associated with research into the efficacy of a specific intervention, it can also be used more broadly as a theory to explain change in the schooling system as a whole. The South African basic education sector plan has such as a theory of change (Department of Basic Education 2020).

27 Maboya 2018.

28 Space does not permit a very detailed account here of the design and capacity problems behind the weaknesses of these plans. However, this has been documented, for instance in National Treasury (2017).

29 Van der Berg et al. 2020: x.

30 Waldow 2009.

31 Gustafsson 2019; Makuwa 2010.

32 Maponya 2020.

33 Merten 2020.

34 Mkentane 2021.

35 Spaul et al. 2021.

36 Section 58B, introduced into the South African Schools Act through the 2007 Basic Education Laws Amendment Act.

37 National Planning Commission 2012: 309.

38 Education International 2019.

39 SADTU 2019.

40 Bennett (2011) provides an important (but non-South African) critical review of this movement.

41 Gustafsson and Taylor 2018.

42 This simple words correct per minute (wcpm) approach has been used to provide vital information on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on learning losses in South Africa—see Shepherd et al. (2021).

43 The notion that reducing class sizes does not improve learning is common in education planning. However, as argued in Gustafsson and Mabogoane (2012), this draws almost exclusively from research in developed countries, and relates to marginal changes in class sizes where the point of departure is completely different from that in South Africa.

44 World Bank Human Capital Index for September 2020.

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