RESEP
Research on Socio-Economic Policy

Stellenbosch UNIVERSITY IYUNIVESITHI UNIVERSITEIT

UNIVERSITY OF KWAZULU-NATAL INYUVESI YAKWAZULU-NATALI

RESEP WORKING PAPER

Department of Economics, Stellenbosch University

Working Paper No.

08/25

NOVEMBER 2025

Schooling and learning?

How South African students get through high school despite low academic outcomes in the early grades

The South African schooling system has made great progress in school participation. To manage the large number of unprepared learners in the system it deploys a hybrid system of automatic promotion and grade repetition. Having improved attainment rates (in the number of students completing Grade 12) it is time to focus concertedly on systems of remediation and an improvement in the quality of schooling outcomes

Authors

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OPTIMA

Schooling and learning? How South African students get through high school despite low academic outcomes in the early grades

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Abstract

This paper addresses the following research question: How is it that larger-than-expected proportions of students in the system successfully complete schooling despite the majority of learners not being on a successful learning track in the earlier grades? We aim to describe how South African learners move through the school system at high school, what facilitates these flows, how teachers understand the dynamics of learner progress through the grades, and the implications for how we think about South Africa's promotion, retention, and assessment systems. We describe nine factors that facilitate learner flows to Grade 12, despite early indications that most Grade 4 learners are not performing at grade level. The paper draws on interviews with 50 high school teachers, existing quantitative databases, official reports and policy documents in the context of two central tensions within the system: firstly, between very high participation rates and quality provision, and secondly, between social promotion and grade repetition. We discuss the implications of how these tensions play out at the school level, especially as they relate to the curriculum, assessment and promotion system, accountability for learning, and remediation across levels in the system. We argue, first, that the system has both retention and social promotion policies, but that this hybrid system is not well understood; and second, that these policies are not accompanied by clear remediation strategies, particularly in Grades 8 and 9, where they are essential.

Keywords: social promotion, grade retention, remediation

Introduction

This paper begins with an empirical puzzle: how is it that less than 20% of Grade 4s in South Africa can read for understanding yet over 60% of the cohort[1] passes matric? The 2021 PIRLS[2] report confirmed that 81% of South African Grade 4 learners did not reach the low benchmark on the test, implying that they were unable to read with comprehension in their home languages (Mullis et al. 2023). This figure had increased by 3 percentage points from 2016, largely attributed to COVID-19 learning losses. Primary grade numeracy and mathematics skills are also low. In TIMSS 2023, just 35% of Grade 5 South African learners reached the low-international benchmark in mathematics (Von Davier et al., 2024). At the same time, Selkirk and Wills (2024) show greater efficiency in the schooling system. This relates to improved learner flows to Grade 12 (due to lower repetition and less dropout) and improved success in the National Senior Certificate (NSC) (commonly referred to as 'matric') as reflected in rising pass rates. Over 725,000 full-time candidates wrote the NSC

[1] Applying statistical methods to the quarter 1 2024 quarterly labour force survey, it is estimated that almost 64% of youth had successfully completed a Grade 12 level qualification (Selkirk & Wills, 2024, p16). Some may argue using pseudo-cohorts, and applying various assumptions, that this figure is lower on the basis that there were about 1,04 million Grade 4s in public schools in 2016, and about 615 thousand Grade 12s passed South Africa's school leaving National Senior Certificate (NSC) in 2024. Assuming that the Grade 4s of 2016 did not repeat, and remained in public schools this may imply a NSC success rate of 59% for the 2016 Grade 4 cohort. However, some school goers will also go on to finish school later or complete an equivalent NSC level qualification in Technical Vocational Education and Training colleges raising this figure further.

[2] Progress in International Reading and Literacy Study.

examinations in 2022 - 30% more than the annual average number writing across 2013-2019.[3] The largest increases have been seen in the poorest schools. Likewise, there has been a steady improvement in the pass rate for the National Senior Certificate (NSC or 'matric'), particularly in the poorest schools, with the highest-ever pass rate of 88% achieved in 2025. The aim of this paper is not to provide a literal answer to the initiating question – that would probably not be possible. Rather, our interest is in how learners are moving through the school system, what facilitates flows, how teachers understand the dynamics around learner progress through the grades and what the implications are for how we think about South Africa's promotion and assessment system. We provide nine factors that facilitate learner flows to Grade 12, despite early indications of most students[4] not performing at grade level. The paper draws on policy, teacher accounts, existing research and official reports in the context of two central tensions within the system: between very high participation rates and quality provision, and between social promotion and grade repetition. The implications for how these tensions play out at the school level are drawn out in the conclusion, especially as they relate to how we think about our curriculum, assessment and promotion system, how we think about accountability for learning and what this means regarding remediation across levels in the system.

Setting the scene: participation and quality

South Africa has very high school participation rates; close to 100% for children up to age 15 (which is not exceptional compared to other countries), but also participation levels among youths aged 15 to 19 that exceed most middle-income countries (DBE, 2024a, p.4). In addition, the percentage of youths successfully completing twelve grades of education in South Africa is on a par with that seen in economically similar countries, improving from 45% in 2008 to 62% in 2022 (ibid, p.4). Despite the 62% completion statistic, students may take many more than 12 years to complete school due to grade repetition (ibid.). Nationally, repetition rates are lower than they used to be but remain quite high particularly at Grade 1, Grade 4, Grade 8 and especially Grade 10 levels as seen in Figure 1 (van der Berg et al., 2026). Even though South Africa's repetition system is restricted, whereby learners are only allowed to be repeated once per phase[5], repetition rates in South Africa are high by middle-income standards (Wills, 2023).

In terms of quality, the picture is mixed and complex. According to a recent McKinsey report on education, South Africa is one of seven 'exemplary improvers of educational quality around the world' (McKinsey, 2024). Improvements have been seen on three international assessment programmes, PIRLS, TIMSS[6] and SEACMEQ[7], although these show signs of slowing down more recently with setbacks attributed to COVID-19. Despite improvements, however, South Africa is still a low performer relative to other countries. TIMSS 2023, for example, revealed the comparatively lowest levels of performance at the Grade 5 and Grade 9 levels in South Africa relative to other participating countries (Von Davier et al., 2024), with large disparities across learners from different socio-economic groups, language, province and school quintiles. Internally, a key indicator of quality is participation and performance in Mathematics. Proportionally fewer NSC candidates are taking Mathematics each year. But the mathematics pass rate is exceptionally low, with only around

[3] In addition to improved flows (or survival to matric), part of the 2022-2024 increase in NSC candidate numbers relates to the removal of the Multiple Examinations Opportunity in 2020 which resulted in more students writing as full-time rather than part-time candidates (Selkirk and Wills, 2004) and due to demographic pressures related to a birth surge between 2003-2005 (Gustafsson, 2018).

[4] The term 'student' and 'learner' is used interchangeably in the paper. Official policy tends to favour 'learner'; research uses 'student' more frequently.

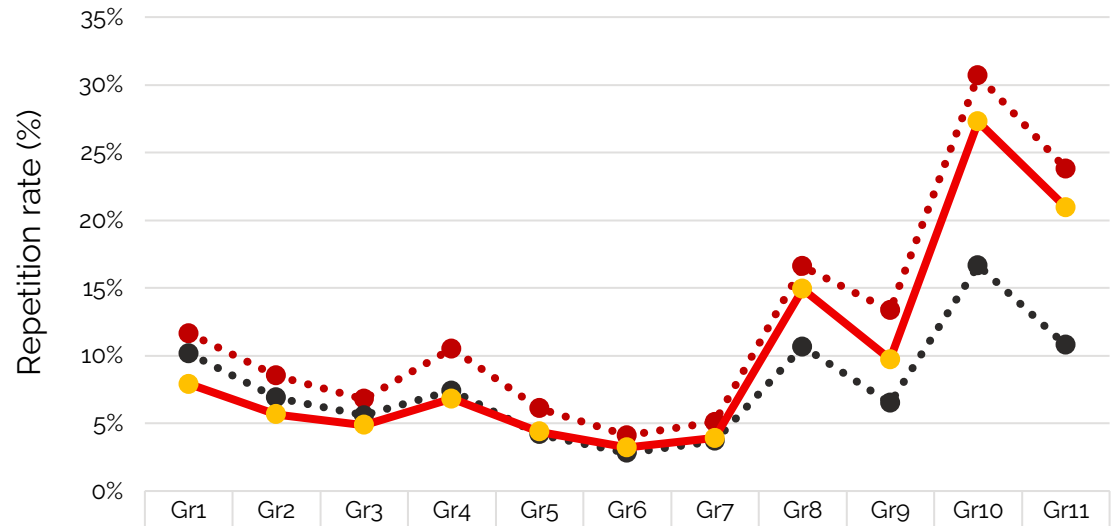
[5] The South African education system is structured into four phases: the Foundation Phase (Grades R-3), which focuses on basic literacy, numeracy and life skills; the Intermediate Phase (Grades 4-6), which broadens learning across subjects; the Senior Phase (Grades 7-9), which completes the General Education and Training band; and the Further Education and Training Phase (Grades 10-12), which prepares learners for tertiary education or the workforce.

[6] Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study.

[7] South and and Eastern African Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality.

half of candidates obtaining the minimum pass mark of 30% and only 15% reaching the critical 60%-mark threshold prioritised by the DBE (DBE, 2024a, p.42) and higher education institutions.

Figure 1: Repetition rates at the end of 2019, 2020 and 2023 in South Africa in a balanced panel of schools,



	Gr1	Gr2	Gr3	Gr4	Gr5	Gr6	Gr7	Gr8	Gr9	Gr10	Gr11
2019	12%	9%	7%	11%	6%	4%	5%	17%	13%	31%	24%
2020	10%	7%	6%	7%	4%	3%	4%	11%	6%	17%	11%
2023	8%	6%	5%	7%	4%	3%	4%	15%	10%	27%	21%

Notes: Source: Van der Berg et al. (2025). Calculated from LURITS data for 2019 to 2024. To ensure comparability of results over time, the analysis is based on a balanced panel that includes only schools that consistently submitted data for every year within the analysis period.

In systems with high levels of school participation and low levels of learning there are two policy options for the inevitably large proportion of learners who do not master grade level requirements: social (or automatic) promotion or grade retention (or repetition). Social promotion involves advancing students to the next grade regardless of their academic performance. The policy is common across developed countries, like Denmark, Japan and parts of the United States, for example, and across developing countries such as Ghana, Uganda and Namibia, more common at the primary than high school levels. Advocates claim social promotion avoids harming students' self-esteem, supports their social and emotional development, and prevents increased dropout rates associated with retention. Proponents also focus on relative costs of grade retention and automatic promotion (Manacorda, 2012).

Grade retention, common in many developing countries including low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), entails holding students back to repeat a grade until they meet minimum academic standards. Proponents of grade repetition argue that it maintains academic standards and retains high expectations for learning and success, providing clear indications of what students know (Ahmed and Mihiretie, 2015). Social promotion is criticised for lowering expectations and motivation. Automatically promoted students face difficulty meeting the standards required in the next grade level, which in turn decreases their interest and motivation to learn (ibid.). For example, disincentive effects of automatic progression have been observed in Brazil (Koppensteiner, 2014). But there is also international evidence that shows that retention significantly increases the risk of dropping out (Jimerson et al., 2006) and that any short-term benefits of repetition on learning fade out over time (Valbuena et al., 2021). In the South African context specifically, we know that not keeping pace at school is a fundamental determinant of who drops out (Branson et al, 2014).

However, there is emerging local evidence that early grade repetition, especially in Grade 1, could be beneficial for improving students' reading fluency levels (Wills, 2023) and for attaining higher marks than non-repeating students in the year they repeat with limited evidence of fade out of benefits from Grades 1 to 4 (Clayton, 2025).

The evidence on the effect of different policies is very mixed (Goos et al, 2021) and skewed towards high income countries, especially the United States. However, there is some agreement in the research literature that structural issues like resource constraints and teacher quality often exacerbate the challenges associated with both strategies (especially relevant in LMICs) and that a priority in these debates should be careful consideration of the support provided to repeaters to enhance their educational experience and outcomes (Picklo & Christenson, 2005).

South Africa has de facto a hybrid system of both social promotion and grade retention, explained in more detail below, where there is widespread repetition but also the practice of 'progressing' learners who don't meet academic requirements for a particular grade to the following grade. Our interest is in how teachers understand this hybrid system and what the implications are for school completion (attainment) on the one hand and learning quality on the other.

Methodology

In developing an understanding of learner flows through the system, we draw on a range of quantitative and qualitative, and primary and secondary data sources. The main data source is qualitative data generated within the project titled Mixed Methods Investigation into Learning Assessment, Progression and Support (MILAPS)[8]. In the MILAPS study, we interviewed 50 teachers in eight high schools teaching English, Mathematics, Mathematical Literacy and History at Grade 8 and Grade 10 levels in 2024. The interviews asked teachers about repetition and progression of students in their school, how they understood learner flows through high school and elicited their experiences on assessment practices (especially related to School Based Assessments (SBAs))[9].

The second data source draws from the Data Driven Districts (DDD) initiative, that comprises routinely collected public school data from the South African School Administration System (SA-SAMS). This allowed for an analysis of student marks (both SBA and exam marks) across different subjects and levels in six provinces. The research team obtained permission to access anonymised student mark data from six provinces (the Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal, Gauteng, Mpumalanga, Limpopo and North West) analysing 2023 student mark distributions in key subjects of interest in Grades 8 to 11. Student mark distributions are considered in relation to critical pass thresholds (as stipulated in policy) and normal distributions to identify the presence of mark adjustments and manipulation.

The third data source included official policy documents and official reports, particularly related to promotion and progression and examinations. The focus in the paper is on learner flows at the high school rather than primary school level.

For the qualitative study, we employed a purposive sampling strategy to obtain a broad range of eight 'typical' South African schools. Two provinces, the Western Cape and the Eastern Cape, were selected for their distinct socio-economic, historical, and educational contexts. The four schools within each of the provinces were all publicly funded schools with National Senior Certificate (NSC) enrolments above 40 learners and at least half of the school-going population was African. For accessibility, we selected urban or peri-urban schools. Half the schools were fee-paying and the

[8] The MILAPS study is 5-year project broadly exploring issues of repetition, assessment, progression and support within schools in South Africa from both quantitative and qualitative perspectives. This OPTIMA funded project involves a multi-disciplinary team from Stellenbosch University, the University of Cape Town and the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

[9] A School-Based Assessment (SBA) refers to the continuous evaluation of a learner's progress through tasks, projects, tests, and assignments conducted at the school level throughout the academic year. In South Africa, SBAs form an integral part of the formal assessment system, complementing external examinations.

other half were no-fee schools.[10] We also selected high and low performing schools based on an analysis of NSC results data across the three years prior to 2024. The 50 teachers we interviewed taught English (Home Language or First Additional Language), Mathematics, Mathematical Literacy, and History at the Grade 8 and Grade 10 levels. The teachers had a diverse range of professional experience. The teachers entered the profession through diverse initial teacher education pathways, with almost half holding a Postgraduate Certificate in Education. Of the 50 teachers, 34% had less than five years of teaching experience and 30% had 10–19 years of teaching experience. A further 20% had 5–10 years teaching experience, while 16% had more than 20 years teaching experience.

Collectively, the three data sources provide the basis for the findings that follow on the factors that support learners in progressing to Grade 12, despite South Africa's poor average performance in primary grade international assessments.

Findings

Promotion and progression policy requirements

South African learners move through the school system either by being *promoted* or by being *progressed*. Promotion is the movement of a learner from one grade to the next when that learner attains the minimum required levels of achievement per subject in a particular grade as stipulated in policy. Progression, however, is defined as the advancement of a learner from one grade to the next (excluding grade R), despite the learner not having complied with all promotion requirements (Department of Basic Education, 2012).

There are two aspects to progression. The first is legislation limiting the number of years a learner can remain in a phase. This has been in place since 1998 for the General Education and Training (GET) phase (grades R to 9) and is referred to as the years-in-phase or YIP policy. What the policy means is that a student can repeat only once in a phase, after which they must be automatically promoted to the following grade if they don't meet promotion requirements a second time[11]. At the GET level the policy was a response to high enrolment and low throughput rates at the time. Repetition, which was the largest contributing factor, placed an enormous financial strain on the system. Repetition rates continue to be exacerbated at the Further Education and Training (FET) level, where poorly performing learners likely to fail the Grade 12 examination are held back to meet Grade 12 national pass rate targets set by the Minister of Education (since 2001) (Crouch & Vinjevold, 2006; Branson et al, 2014). The years-in-phase policy was extended to the FET phase in 2013. Greater specificity to the working of the policy was provided in a range of circulars in 2015 and 2016 (DBE, 2016). These stipulated that for a learner to be progressed in the FET band:

a) The learner must have failed to satisfy the promotion requirements of either Grade 10 or Grade 11 and repeated either Grade 10 or Grade 11;
b) The learner must have passed the Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT) and another three of the seven subjects offered;
c) The learner must have attended school on a regular basis. Absenteeism in excess of 20 days, without a valid reason, will disqualify the learner from being progressed;
d) The learner must have complied with the prescribed school-based assessment (SBA) requirements for that academic year.

[10] No-fee schools are typically Quintile 1-3 schools. They are not allowed to charge fees to students but receive larger per student subsidies than schools which are allowed to charge fees. Typically, fee-charging schools are synonymous with Quintile 4 or 5 schools.

[11] Department of Education (1998) *Admission Policy for Ordinary Public Schools.* Guideline for repetition is "one year per school phase where necessary" (Department of Education, 1998)

A second aspect to progression concerns adjusting a learner's mark to meet the pass requirement. The practice of mark adjustments became formalised in a Department of Basic Education circular in 2015. According to this policy, mark adjustments could be applied in a maximum of three (3) subjects where a learner had obtained a mark within a 7% range of the pass requirement. These adjustments were prioritised in Home Language, First Additional Language and Mathematics[12]. The intention was that these adjustments would be slowly phased out as the new 2012 (CAPS) curriculum became entrenched in the system: "The number of subjects and the percentage range in which a learner can receive an adjustment will decrease with each successive year of CAPS implementation" so that only a 2% adjustment could be made by 2018.

Stott et al. (2015) suggest that the marks adjustment policies arose from the failure of the intended GET school leaving certificate to materialise. The 2007 GET proposal was for an exit examination after which students would transfer to either an academic or vocational stream in the FET phase. These GET proposals were marred primarily by the lack of development of a robust Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) system and failure to create the systems to administer a GET certificate. This left large numbers of learners who had not met the requirements to pass Grade 9 with no alternative pathways other than to pursue the FET academic route. A new curriculum (the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS)) was implemented in 2012, with clear specification of content and assessment requirements. Consequently knowledge gaps were likely to be more apparent and there were reports of wide-scale manipulation of marks (ibid.).

It is difficult to track the policy between 2015 and the present as many of the changes to promotion and progression rules were issued through circulars and the specific details of the marks adjustment policy could vary by province and year. However, in the context of COVID-19 learning losses in 2021 and 2022, national policy for Grades 4 to 9 was clarified as allowing a 5% adjustment in three subjects, with an additional adjustment (condonation) in Mathematics should the learner not meet the promotion requirements for this subject preventing them proceeding to the next grade. This policy persists and until Grade 10, a learner cannot fail a grade based on failing Mathematics but would have to fail more than three other subjects as well to fail.[13] Mark adjustments are not applicable in the FET phase as per policy even though mark manipulation to pass thresholds occurs in practice in Grades 10-11. 'Standardisation' processes are also applied at the Grade 12 level where marks may be adjusted based on historical averages (through the examinations body, UMALUSI).

What is the impact of these promotion and progression policies on teachers, particularly at the Grade 8 and Grade 10 levels?

In our study, 32 of the 50 teachers interviewed in July 2024 did not know how many learners in their classes had been progressed. About half (14) of these were Grade 10 teachers. The teachers indicated that they had a sense that many learners had been progressed, but their presence in the class and grade appeared to be normalised. They were not identified for remediation and only a few teachers indicated that they were identifiable by different behaviours – "I'm not sure how many, but you can tell by the age of some learners and the way they answer questions that they have progressed" (Teacher H8M). One Grade 8 teacher said, "They arrive in high school without being able to read and write. Then we have to turn stones into bread" (Teacher F8EFAL). Information regarding learners' progression or promotion from the previous grade is potentially available to teachers on learners' official report cards, but it appears that teachers do not look for it.

[12] DBE (2015). National Assessment Circular No. 3 of 2015

[13] National Assessment Circular 01 of 2021 on the Implementation of the 2021 Assessment Programme in Mainstream and Special Schools across the General Education and Training (GET); National Assessment Circular 03 of 2021, dated 30 October 2021.

Similarly, Stott et al (2015) found that teachers in their Free State sample noted considerable impacts on teaching and learning. Teachers reported that progressed learners were "slow, making it difficult for the teacher to keep up with the pace setter, unmotivated, disinterested, ill-equipped, ill-disciplined, unable to cope, often truant from class and extra classes and do not do their class- and home-work" (p. 98).

In our eight case study schools, the Grade 10 level teachers commented that most of the learners were condoned from Grade 9 because they had failed Mathematics. Eleven of the Grade 8 teachers identified progression from primary schools as the key problem for Grade 8 teachers, arguing that many students came to high school without having mastered basic reading and mathematical skills. Teacher B8EHL at School B, a Quintile 5 school in the Western Cape, explained how this had a knock-on effect for getting learners through Grade 8 and Grade 9:

> In Grade 8, there were a lot [of progressed learners]. Maths condonation passed a lot of kids and last year we had to re- moderate their work and we had to get them in to redo their [English] orals just so we could get them to that 50% and they had that 5% extra, so we just had to get them to 45%. Grade 9, we had a 23% pass rate this term. Everyone failed maths in Grade 8 to 9 – so we had a high percentage of condoned learners. Most had failed maths and English. The maths condonations and orals get them through.

Nationally, the most recent estimates from administrative data in the form of LURITS[14] shows that 27% of learners are repeating Grade 10 (as seen in Figure 1). The Years-In-Phase, mark adjustments and mathematics condonation rules help to explain the high repetition rates in Grade 10. It becomes more difficult to progress learners from Grade 10 onwards as there is no allowance for mark adjustments and no Mathematics condonation at this level. As Teacher B10EHL pointed out, 'Grade 10s struggle with the focus subjects. There is lots of pushing over from Grade 9, because of years- in- phase or condonation. So, then the failure rate spikes again in Grade 10. At this level we can't just award marks or let them redo things'. In Mathematics especially, if learners' knowledge gaps leading to condonation have not been addressed from Grades 4 to Grades 9, the buck will finally stop in Grade 10 or Grade 11. Several teachers indicated that learners who fail Mathematics at the grade 10 and 11 levels are often moved to Mathematical Literacy, a subject that functions to absorb the large number of mathematically unprepared learners who have been condoned and promoted in previous grades.

Weighting and completion of SBA tasks

End-of-term and promotion marks in South African schools are calculated using a combination of School-Based Assessment (SBA) and examination marks. SBAs include class tests, assignments, projects, oral tasks, and practical work completed during the year. While a necessary assessment component, the setting and marking of SBAs has historically been lenient in many schools and often weakly correlated with students' performance on more standardised examinations, such as the National Senior Certificate (Van der Berg et al. 2024; Van der Berg & Shepherd, 2015). Provincial differences in the alignment between SBA and matric results are striking. In some schools, learners' SBA marks correspond closely with their examination outcomes, indicating well-calibrated and effectively moderated assessments. In others, however, SBA marks are substantially higher than exam results, pointing to inconsistencies in assessment standards (Van der Berg et al. 2024; Van der Berg & Shepherd, 2015). This inflation is most pronounced among learners near key performance thresholds—particularly those on the verge of passing or qualifying for a Bachelor's

[14] Learner Unit Record Information Tracking System.

pass in matric. It follows that adjustments to the weight of SBAs can have a strong bearing on promotion rates.

In 2020, an additional mechanism to facilitate progression to the next grade was introduced by changing the weighting of the SBA component of the promotion mark. At the Grade 8 and 9 level, the 40% weighting of SBAs in 2019 changed to an 80% weighting in 2020 and 2021 (the COVID-19 years) to a 60% weighting since 2022. At the Grade 10 and 11 levels, the weighting of SBAs shifted from 25% in 2019 to 60% during the COVID years to 40% since 2022. All the teachers interviewed indicated that learners performed better on SBAs than on examinations. According to teachers, many more learners failed examinations because they were required to work on their own without the scaffolding and guidance of the teacher.

The increased weighting for SBAs attached greater importance to these activities and intensified teachers' responsibility to ensure they were completed. It was apparent from interviews that in many instances SBAs are not completed independently by learners but are highly scaffolded by the teacher. "We make it so easy for them - we walk them every step of the way in the research assignment" (Teacher A10H). In six English lessons, we observed teachers taking learners through the completion of an SBA task. These tasks were often obtained from the district or from teacher groups and were moderated internally. Teachers reduced the tasks to step-by-step procedures to be completed by the class as a whole or in groups.

SBAs are often jointly produced in classrooms or at home with the assistance of parents. In Mathematics, the Grade 10 teacher (H10M), articulated this reliance on parental assistance: "They do not submit the SBAs, such as the investigation. They don't care. They are meant to ask parents or sisters to help but they don't. They do not put effort into doing the work".

A Grade 8 History (F8H) teacher in a Quintile 3 school in the Eastern Cape explained: "For Term 1 and term 2, 55 learners got below 30%. I had six bright sparks. Those other 60% who cannot read and write, they get projects to do at home and they get help from their parents. Or they do group work projects".

It was also apparent from the interviews that it is rare for a learner to fail an SBA, and learners were provided with multiple opportunities to successfully complete tasks. A Grade 8 Mathematics teacher (H8M) explained: "We mark and return the work to them so that they can fix what they have done. The mandate is that no child should fail an assignment. They can fail a test but not an assignment. If they fail you have to give it back to them so that they redo".

Many teachers felt that the responsibility for completing SBAs fell to teachers, rather than being on learners. A number of teachers spoke of the time and effort required to follow up on learners who had not submitted SBAs or who were absent. The submission of marks for every learner for every task on SA-SAMS was used by districts as a measure of school functionality and in turn, principals used this as a compliance measure for teachers. Teacher H10EFAL at a no-fee school in the Eastern Cape explained: "We have to monitor to get the assignments – we have to follow up to ensure that everyone submits".

The net result is that the SBA mark for learners in many instances may not reflect learners' mastery or diligence and makes up to some extent for poor outcomes on the examinations[15]. Its weighting relative to the examination mark makes the weighting adjustments consequential for proceeding to the next grade.

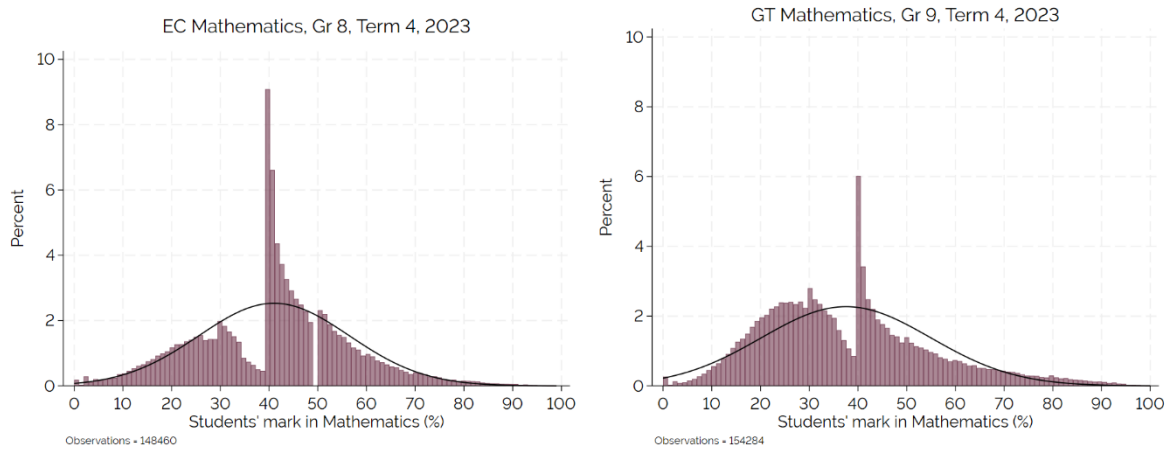
[15] This is not at all new. Crouch and Vinjevold (2006) (citing Malherbe, 1977) point out that the 'tactic' of combining school-based marks with external examination in deciding whether a student "passed" was instituted as far back as 1922.

Mark adjustments and manipulation

The adjustment of SBA marks was common according to the teachers we interviewed, generally of learners who were close to passing. While in many cases the adjustments were made according to policy, in other cases additional marks were added. One Grade 8 History teacher (C8H) said "We get told, 'you have too many failures', 'go back to rectify'. So those close to 30%, they get pushed up", suggesting marks manipulation rather than adjustments (see section on English below as well).

A combination of adjustments and manipulation of student marks is evident in the DDD data. For example, in term 4 for mathematics in 2023, the Grade 8 and 9 student mark distributions are non-normal with very large jumps or bunching in the percentage frequency of marks at or just over 40%. In Figure 2, for example, compared to an expected normal distribution, the actual Grade 8 and 9 mathematics mark distributions for Term 4 suggest that students who would normally score between 30-39% in Mathematics are being pushed up to the pass threshold of 40%. This pattern is observed across all six provinces for which we have DDD data, but is most pronounced in the Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and Mpumalanga. Two examples are given in Figure 2 in Mathematics at the Grade 8 level in the Eastern Cape (EC) and the Grade 9 level in Gauteng (GT). The bars showing the abnormal actual mark distribution with the dip below, and bulge at, the 40% (pass mark) threshold point are compared to a black line showing an expected normal distribution curve.

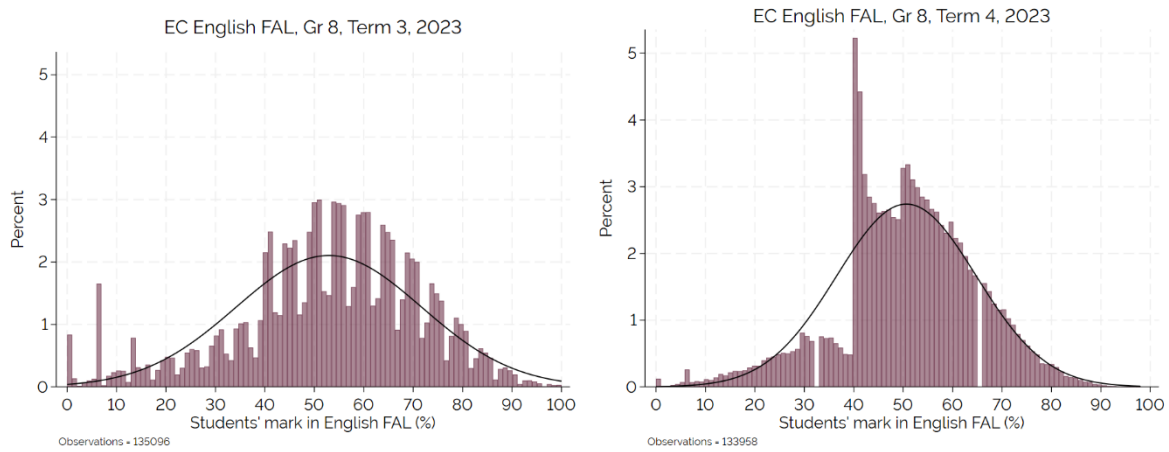
Figure 2: Distribution of Term 4 student marks in Mathematics in two provinces, Data Driven Districts data 2023



Source: Own graph using Data Driven Districts, six provinces. Notes: Normal distribution shown by black curve. 101 bins shown.

As in the case of Mathematics shown above, the manipulation or adjustment of marks is evident in English in the DDD data set. In English First Additional Language, the concentration of Grade 8 and 9 marks in term 4 at a pass threshold of 40% is also very evident, especially in the Eastern Cape, Limpopo, Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal. Relative to a normal distribution, there is limited concentration of marks at around 25-39% suggesting that the assessment results of students within this mark range are pushed upwards towards the pass threshold. But there is far less evidence of this practice taking place in the term 3 English First Additional Language distributions which are closer to normal, implying that the pressure to promote students at the end of the school year results in grade inflation, mark adjustments or further mark manipulation to reach pass thresholds to support grade promotion. This is exemplified in the graphs in Figure 4 below showing the difference in the curve for Grade 8 EFAL in the Eastern Cape in 2023 in Term 3 and Term 4.

Figure 3: Distribution of Term 3 and 4 student marks in English First Additional Language in the Eastern Cape, Data Driven Districts data 2023



Source: Own graph using Data Driven Districts, six provinces. Notes: Normal distribution shown by black curve. 101 bins shown.

Although these patterns are also evident at the FET level, term marks follow increasingly normal distributions across the grading levels in Grade 12. This is possibly attributable to schools' knowledge that "SBAs will be disregarded if too far off" (Teacher E8EHL) – i.e. only a 10% discrepancy between the final examination result and the SBA result is allowed in Grade 12 otherwise the SBA is not considered.

Assessment strategies for passing the gateway subject English

Learners are required to pass the language of teaching and learning, which for most learners is English[16]. In both English Home Language (HL) and English First Additional Language (EFAL), a number of strategies aim to facilitate passing that focus on different assessment components of English. The assessment of both EFAL and EHL from Grade 8 to Grade 12 comprises comprehension, language, a summary, literature, a creative essay, transactional writing, and orals.

One of the primary mechanisms to facilitate passing are rubrics which mandate very lenient marking. For example, for the transactional writing task (such as writing a business letter or invitation card), a quarter of the marks is allocated to format alone. For orals, marks are allocated for presentation style and rubrics allow for high levels of subjective grading. For creative writing tasks, marks are awarded simply for writing something down. For example, Figure 3 below shows an extract from the rubric for marking the Home Language essay. Under *Elementary, Lower level,* the criteria show that it is possible to gain between 7 and 9 marks out of 30 for content and planning described as: "Largely irrelevant response -Ideas tend to be disconnected and confusing -Hardly any evidence of organisation and coherence".

[16] Grade 8 promotion requires 40% pass for EFAL or 50% EHL. Gr 10 promotion requires 30% EFAL (in cases where it is the LOLT) or 40% pass EHL.

Figure 4: Assessment rubric for FET English essay (EFAL and EHL)

ASSESSMENT RUBRIC FOR ESSAY – HOME LANGUAGE [50 MARKS]

Criteria		Exceptional	Skilful	Moderate	Elementary	Inadequate
CONTENT AND PLANNING (Response and ideas) Organisation of ideas for planning; Awareness of purpose, audience and context **30 MARKS**	Upper level	**28–30** -Outstanding/Striking response beyond normal expectations -Intelligent, thought-provoking and mature ideas -Exceptionally well organised and coherent, including introduction, body and conclusion	**22–24** -Very well-crafted response -Fully relevant and interesting ideas with evidence of maturity -Very well organised and coherent, including introduction, body and conclusion	**16–18** -Satisfactory response -Ideas are reasonably coherent and convincing -Reasonably organised and coherent, including introduction, body and conclusion	**10–12** -Inconsistently coherent response -Unclear ideas and unoriginal -Little evidence of organisation and coherence	**4–6** -Totally irrelevant response -Confused and unfocused ideas -Vague and repetitive -Unorganised and incoherent
	Lower level	**25–27** -Excellent response but lacks the exceptionally striking qualities of the outstanding essay -Mature and intelligent ideas -Skilfully organised and coherent, including introduction, body and conclusion	**19–21** -Well-crafted response -Relevant and interesting ideas -Well organised and coherent, including introduction, body and conclusion	**13–15** -Satisfactory response but some lapses in clarity -Ideas are fairly coherent and convincing -Some degree of organisation and coherence, including introduction, body and conclusion	**7–9** -Largely irrelevant response -Ideas tend to be disconnected and confusing -Hardly any evidence of organisation and coherence	**0–3** -No attempt to respond to the topic -Completely irrelevant and inappropriate -Unfocused and muddled

Source: DBE (2024c)

The Grade 10 English teacher (E10EHL) said in her interview that teachers "pushed Paper 3" (creative writing) because 'they can get through on this', understood as by Teacher E8EHL as 'impossible for learners to fail'. She explained that just getting the essay structure right counted for a lot. 'We focus on the things the learners can do without understanding', and teachers were required not to mark on spelling and language. The predictability of the structure of the English exam papers enabled learners to pass:

> It is possible to do it in a very parrot fashion. We are creating robots. Paper 1 [Language in Context] (30) [they] can learn a lot parrot fashion. You always get an advert [visual literacy test item] and you can learn the basics on how to answer that. Paper 2 [Literature] (30) most fail but can get marks just for structure. And then Paper 3 [creative essay and transactional writing] is almost impossible to fail.

At a no-fee school in the Eastern Cape, Teacher F8EFAL said learners passed EFAL because they were helped by the SBA marks, but also because in Paper 3 (creative writing) they could write what they wanted or write an essay they had simply memorised for the exam. The DBE's own diagnostic report (DBE, 2024d) shows that the marks awarded for EFAL Paper 3 are much higher than those for Paper 1 or Paper 2. Paper 3 is more heavily weighted - counting 100 marks out of the total 300 marks. Further, unlike other subjects where the weighting is 75% for examinations and 25% for SBAs at the Grade 12 level, the promotion mark for EFAL in the NSC is weighted with 40% for SBAs and 60% for Examinations and Orals.

Predictability of examination papers and rote learning

The predictability of examination papers has perhaps deepened over time due to the stability of the curriculum since 2012, where past papers are constantly recycled at different levels, in different provinces and for different purposes (coaching in matric camps, preliminary exams, classroom activities). Learners are exposed to the format of the matric exam from Grade 10 in all schools. Teacher G10EFAL explained how learners are coached in examination papers from the beginning of the FET phase: "With FET, the first thing I tell them, your style of doing things is setting a standard for Grade 12. I will make an example, to say, as you will be writing paper 2 out of 70 marks is the same as Grade 12 they will write a paper 2 for 70 marks". The format (including layout and mark allocations) of examinations in Grade 10 for many subjects is the same as that of Grade 12.

At School E, a Quintile 5 school in the Eastern Cape, teachers are allocated the job of analysing the national exam papers each year and identifying shifts in questioning as well as scrutinising the matric markers' reports for common errors. Students are coached on question types and requirements, as well as on question words and their meanings. Three teachers spoke about direct teaching based on marking memoranda.

Rote preparation for examinations came up in a number of the interviews. The Grade 10 History teacher (A10H) said that "Most learners pass Grade 10 by learning essays off-by-heart". At School D, the Grade 10 English FAL teacher, said that from Grade 11 they only teach learners for the test, all instruction time allocated to doing past papers - "We teach them for exams. We train them for assessments. We don't teach them to read and become good readers." The issue was picked up in the DBE's (2024d) diagnostic report that found "a heavy reliance on past papers, with many candidates expecting the examinations to follow predictable patterns. This hindered candidates' ability to apply subject content knowledge in unfamiliar contexts or scenarios" (p.9). Across subjects they found students relying on commonly used responses from previous examination marking guidelines and using them inappropriately in different contexts.

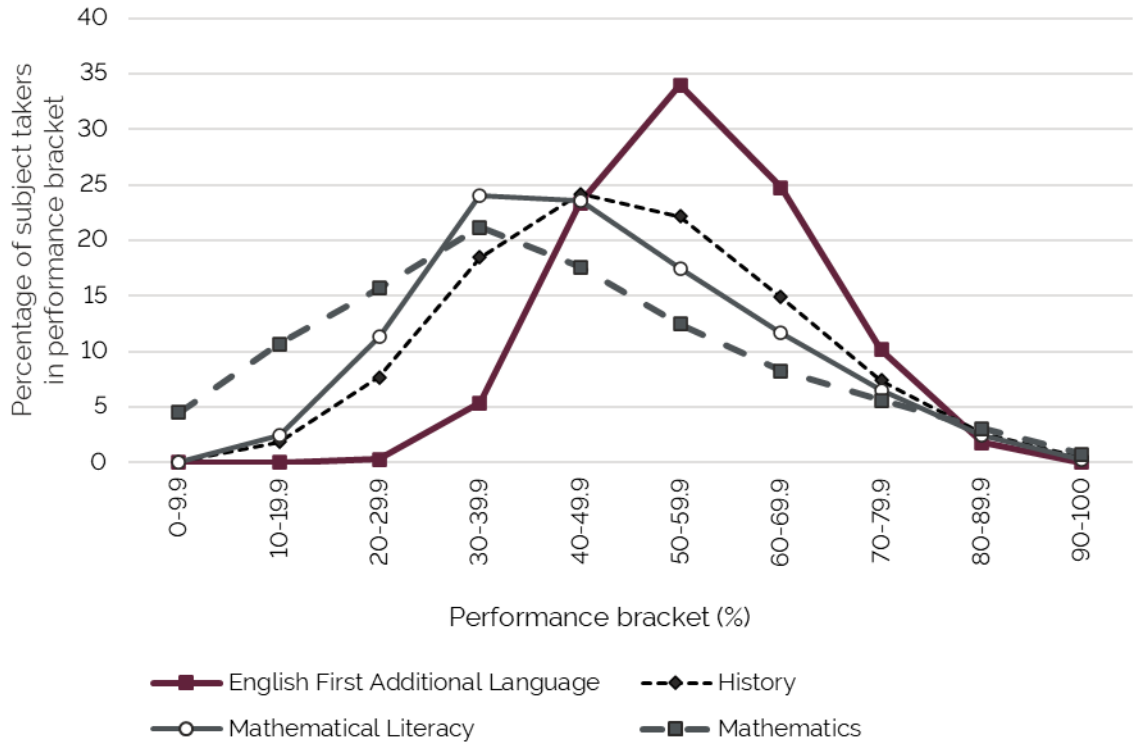
Students passing at a very low level

At FET level (Grade 10 – 11) learners are pass to the following grade (or obtain an NSC Higher Certificate in Grade 12) if they pass four of the seven subjects offered for the National Senior Certificate, comprising the Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT) and three other approved subjects, including Life Orientation at 40%. Students must achieve 30% in another three subjects, allowing for failure in one subject (this may not be the same as the Language of Teaching and Learning) (DBE, 2016, p1-2). This allows for failure in one subject if there is full evidence of the School-Based assessment having been completed (DBE, 2012, p.33).

At School F, the EFAL Teacher F10 questioned the value of a matric pass - "What kind of literacy is required to obtain a 30% pass in English?". The same Grade 10 teacher argued, 'So, this is just about getting them to the other side. When they get on the other side, it is nothing. For the Department it is just political'.

There are different dynamics in different subjects as observed in results from the National Senior Certificate (or matric). EFAL is the matric subject with the highest enrolment rate of all subjects with 583624 (83%) of the total 705291 full-time candidates who sat for the 2024 NSC examination enrolled in the subject (DBE, 2025a, p61). In 2024, the pass rate for the subject was 99,7% and 94,3% of learners passed with 40% or above. This is largely similar to English HL – where 129 772 students sat the exam and 96,9% passed at the 40% level (up from 93% in 2023) (ibid., p60). Specific strategies to facilitate passing in EFAL were discussed above. Still, the very different performance distribution curve in this subject relative to others is puzzling, with 37% of students passing at the 60% level or above (gradually increasing over the past five years).

Figure 5: Performance distribution in four 2024 NSC examinations: English First Additional Language, History, Mathematical Literacy and Mathematics

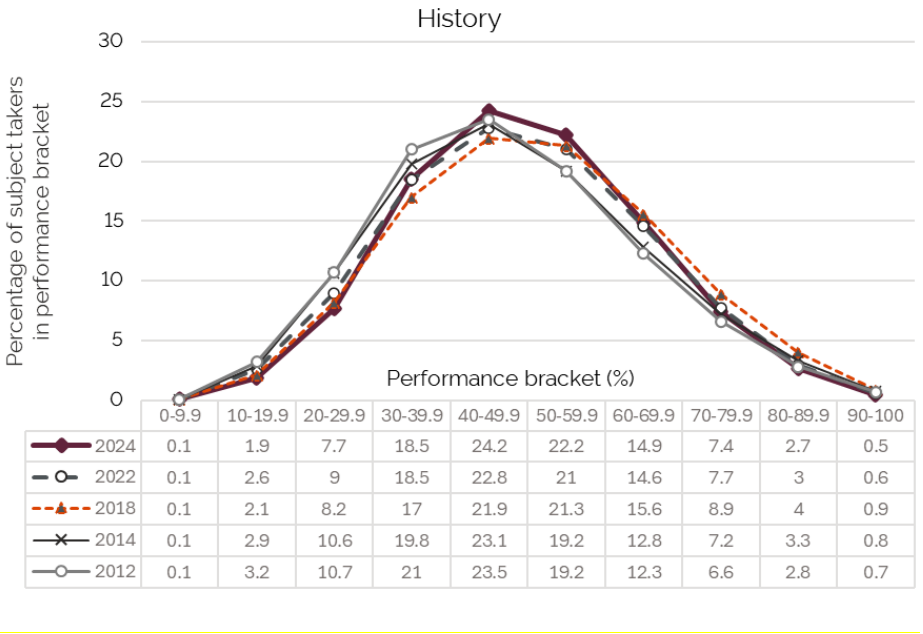


Source: Own graph using figures from the 2024 National Senior Certificate Diagnostic Reports; Book 1 - Graph 7.1.2 (History), Graph 9.1.2 (Mathematical Literacy), Graph 10.1.2 (Mathematics); Book 2; Graph 2.1.2 (EFAL).

A 2014 Ministerial Task Team into the National Senior Certificate (DBE, 2014) found significant problems with the English marking process (including marker and moderator competence and the quality of rubrics). They argued that the subject was being examined at a very low level and recommended raising the cognitive demand of questions in order that the examination has a 'backwash effect' on raising the level of English instruction across the curriculum. A more recent international benchmarking exercise undertaken (Umalusi, 2022) sheds little light on the level and appropriateness of the curriculum and assessment relative to other countries, but does identify one prominent difference, namely the very lenient marking in the South African case.

The percentage of Grade 12 learners choosing the subject of History for the NSC increased from 16% in 2008 to 32% in 2023. In 2024, 42.7% of learners who wrote History passed with grades between 30% and 49.9%. Figure 6 shows that the percentage of learners achieving above 60% decreased to 25.5% in 2024. The report (DBE, 2025b) also notes that learner essays appear to be prepared in advance, which may be why most candidates opt to write two essays and one source-based question. Learners perform poorly on questions that require comparison of sources or writing paragraphs (which cannot be prepared in advance).

Figure 6: NSC History performance distribution curve 2012 - 2024

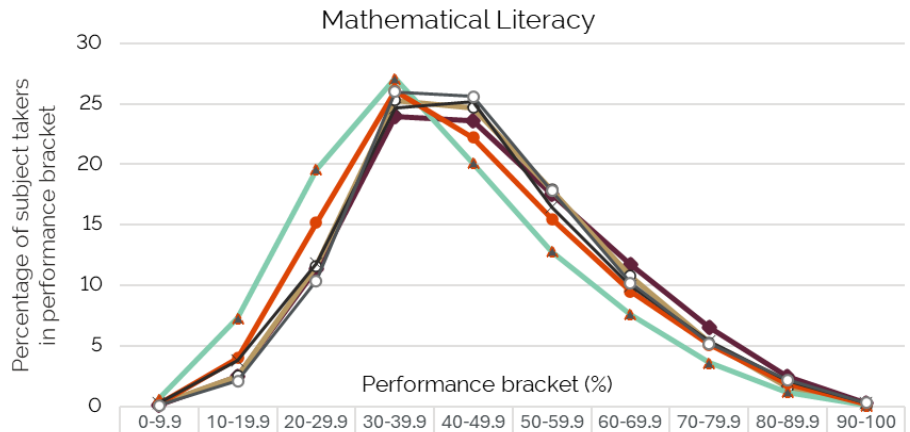


	0-9.9	10-19.9	20-29.9	30-39.9	40-49.9	50-59.9	60-69.9	70-79.9	80-89.9	90-100
2024	0.1	1.9	7.7	18.5	24.2	22.2	14.9	7.4	2.7	0.5
2022	0.1	2.6	9	18.5	22.8	21	14.6	7.7	3	0.6
2018	0.1	2.1	8.2	17	21.9	21.3	15.6	8.9	4	0.9
2014	0.1	2.9	10.6	19.8	23.1	19.2	12.8	7.2	3.3	0.8
2012	0.1	3.2	10.7	21	23.5	19.2	12.3	6.6	2.8	0.7

Source: Own graph using figures from the 2024 & 2019 NSC Diagnostic Reports; Book 1 - Graph 7.1.2 (History), Graph 9.1.2 (Mathematical Literacy), Graph 10.1.2 (Mathematics); Book 2; Graph 2.1.2 (EFAL). 2014 NSC Diagnostic Report Graph 8.1.2 (History); Graph 6.1.2 (EFAL); Graph 10.1.2

For Mathematical Literacy there was a 20 906 increase in the number of candidates writing the subject in 2024 compared to 2023 and there were slight improvements in the class of pass. 62% of students attained a final mark below 50% (DBE, 2025b).

Figure 7: NSC Mathematical Literacy distribution performance curve 2012 - 2024

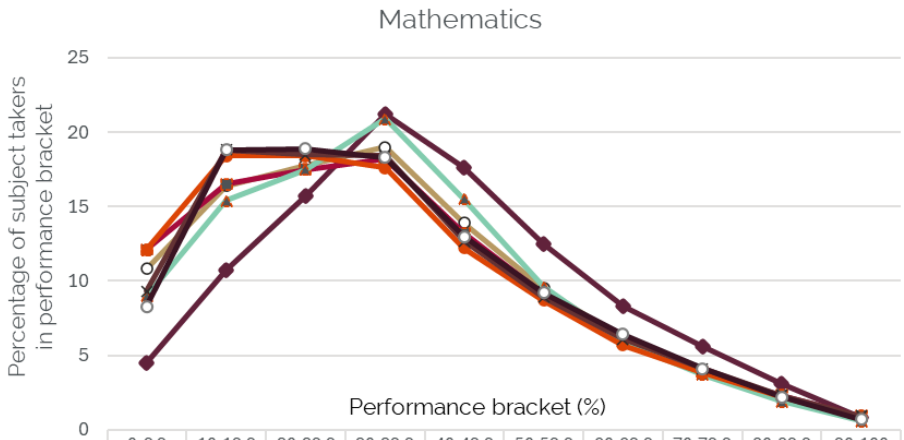


	0-9.9	10-19.9	20-29.9	30-39.9	40-49.9	50-59.9	60-69.9	70-79.9	80-89.9	90-100
2024	0.1	2.5	11.4	24	23.6	17.5	11.7	6.5	2.5	0.3
2022	0.2	2.5	11.6	25.3	24.7	17.9	10.8	5.3	1.6	0.1
2018	0.6	7.3	19.6	27.1	20.1	12.8	7.6	3.6	1.2	0.1
2016	0.2	4	15.2	26.1	22.2	15.5	9.5	5.1	1.9	0.2
2014	0.3	3.8	11.8	24.7	25.2	16.5	10	5.4	2.1	0.3
2012	0.1	2.1	10.4	26	25.6	17.8	10.2	5.2	2.2	0.3

Source: Own graph using figures from the 2024 & 2019 NSC Diagnostic Reports; Book 1 - Graph 7.1.2 (History), Graph 9.1.2 (Mathematical Literacy), Graph 10.1.2 (Mathematics); Book 2; Graph 2.1.2 (EFAL). 2014 NSC Diagnostic Report Graph 8.1.2 (History); Graph 6.1.2 (EFAL); Graph 10.1.2

The 2024 full-time cohort for NSC Mathematics declined by 10 528 candidates to 251 488 between 2023 and 2024 (DBE, 2025a, p62). The overall pass rate improved from 63,5% in 2023 to 69,1% in 2024 (but declined again to 64% in 2025). 70% of candidates achieved below 50%, and almost 40% scored between 30% and 49%. Only 17.8% of mathematics takers reached the critical 60% + mark threshold (DBE, 2025b, p218) prioritised by higher education for admission into STEM programmes.

Figure 8: Mathematics performance distribution curve 2012 - 2024



	0-9.9	10-19.9	20-29.9	30-39.9	40-49.9	50-59.9	60-69.9	70-79.9	80-89.9	90-100
2024	4.5	10.7	15.7	21.2	17.6	12.5	8.3	5.6	3.1	0.8
2022	10.8	16.4	17.8	19	13.9	9.5	6.1	3.8	2	0.7
2020	12.1	16.5	17.5	18.2	13.2	9.1	6.1	3.9	2.3	0.9
2018	9	15.4	17.5	20.9	15.5	9.6	5.9	3.7	1.9	0.6
2016	12.1	18.4	18.4	17.6	12.2	8.7	5.7	3.8	2.2	0.8
2014	9.3	18.8	18.5	18.4	12.7	8.9	6.1	4.1	2.3	0.9
2012	8.3	18.8	18.9	18.3	13	9.2	6.4	4.1	2.2	0.7

Source: Own graph using figures from the 2024 & 2019 NSC Diagnostic Reports; Book 1 - Graph 7.1.2 (History), Graph 9.1.2 (Mathematical Literacy), Graph 10.1.2 (Mathematics); Book 2; Graph 2.1.2 (EFAL). 2014 NSC Diagnostic Report Graph 8.1.2 (History); Graph 6.1.2 (EFAL); Graph 10.1.2.

The broader data shows that learners are passing at low levels in Mathematics and Mathematical Literacy, and to a lesser extent History (but declining over the past few years). In EFAL, contrary to our case study teachers' estimation of students' competency in the language (confirmed in the DBE's diagnostic report which shows extensive difficulties across subjects in the language), students are passing at much higher levels relative to other subjects.

Political and bureaucratic pressure to pass learners

Teachers said that they operate under significant bureaucratic and political pressures, leading to practices that prioritise pass rates over education quality.

Teachers claim that the district places pressure on schools to progress learners. D8EFAL, at School D, said that '37% of grade 8s last year were progressed to grade 9. Now the Grade 9 teachers are complaining. It will happen again this year. The district makes progression decisions. They consider only age, years in phase'. Some of the teachers found the decision-making processes undermining of their professional judgement. C8EFAL said: 'It's frustrating because it feels like they don't trust our judgement on cases like this. Like we spent the entire year with the kid...' Several teachers claimed that the decision to progress learners was made by the School Management Team (SMT) with the district, or more generally 'the department'. In a Quintile 2 Western Cape school, School D, the departmental head (HOD) said more than 200 out of 306 Grade 8 (65%) learners would be progressed to Grade 9 at the end of the year. In a Quintile 3 Eastern Cape (School F) school, a

teacher said that about 40 of the 176 Grade 8s (23%) would be progressed. She continued: 'The department doesn't want failures. They will say they are too old, or they will use the years-in-phase policy. The department pressures us to pass learners'. She says the teachers have a name for progressed learners: 'abaphiwange' which means 'low IQ'. 'Some of them can't read. They can't write. If you give them a question paper, they just copy things out as they are on the paper' (F8EFAL).

Two teachers referred to a 'pile up' of learners in the absence of progression. A Quintile 3 school in the Eastern Cape explained how 50 out of at least 340 Grade 8 and Grade 9s were progressed the previous year. "The school would have had a space issue. Failures would be piling up in Grade 8 and very little space for new Grade 8s".

Teachers also pointed out the administrative requirements of keeping a learner back. Firstly, specific actions are required throughout the year (such as parental meetings) before a learner can be made to repeat. Knowledge of these processes is not well-distributed in all schools. Secondly, the processes are onerous, requiring detailed recording and reporting as well as meetings with parents and teachers. The requirements for the retention of a learner in a grade, as set out in the Guideline for the implementation of promotion and progression requirements for Grades 10–11 (2016) (DBE, 2016) and given further detail in the 2024 'Promotion and Progression requirements: National Senior Certificate Grade 10–12 confirm teachers' reports of the extensive processes required.

The policy requires that schools have strategies in place for identifying low academic achievers early and support systems in place to address learners at risk of failure. The number of teachers who didn't know how many progressed learners or repeaters there were in their classrooms is perhaps indicative of the extent to which these processes are not in place in schools.

The years-in-phase rule is stringently applied in schools resulting in learners who have already repeated in a phase moving up through the grades irrespective of their results. Part of the motivation for this rule concerns classroom discipline and the difficulty of managing large numbers of overage learners in the lower grades. But it is also an economic imperative. Having a large number of repeaters in the system is a significant financial burden. Van der Berg, Wills, et al. (2019) estimated that the cost of having repeaters in the system could be as high as between R20 billion and R29 billion. They argued that if 2018 Grade 10 repetition rates were halved, for example, about R2 billion rand could be saved.

The pressure to pass at matric level entails a whole other dynamic where schools' results are made publicly available and districts and provinces ranked based on the results that schools produce. The intensity of this pressure was expressed by one History teacher (A10H) as, "Coaching, support. I must try everything in my power to make them pass, we must find marks wherever we can. I must suck marks out of my thumb... By god, we make them pass, if we can ..."

Intensive, just-in-time remediation at the Grade 12 level

Officially promoted intervention strategies such as matric camps and summer or winter schools, especially to turn around underperforming schools on the NSC, began in the early 2000s (e.g. Dugmore, 2004). The camps are often a collaborative effort between schools, NGOs and the Department of Basic Education. Often residential, the intension is to provide extra lessons, tutoring, and structured study times in a quiet, well-lit space with meals and security (Govender, 2020). Several of the teachers in the eight schools said that their focus was on drilling and 'training learners to pass the exam'.

Teachers noted that copious resources are directed at matric. "From 8 to 11 you just make them pass. Then in Grade 12 you need 100% pass rate. You get extra classes. Everything for Grade 12. Resources come out of nowhere" (F10EFAL). In the Eastern Cape, reference was made to a range

of district programmes but also NGO provided courses, additional classes, tutoring and materials, both online and in person. All these are provided at the Grade 12 level only. One of the teachers indicated that no additional support was offered for EFAL as the pass rate in this subject was so high.

We gained the impression from the interviews that Grade 8s and Grade 9s are neglected in the intensive focus on Grades 10 to 12. In School D and School C, it was evident that they used student teachers to teach Grade 8 and Grade 9 while experienced teachers focused on the upper grades. However, in School H, the new principal was trying to turn this around by appointing experienced teachers at the Grade 8 and 9 level. For example, the Language HOD was teaching the Grade 8 English class.

More resilient, academically capable and motivated learners in Grade 12

A number of teachers argued that learners in the higher grades became more motivated to study with the prospect of the externally administered matric. Others stated that learners were more mature in the higher grades and able to apply themselves. The Grade 10 History teacher at School H said 'the learners are not serious until Grade 12. Then they start to work hard', and G10EFAL said the learners 'pull up their socks' at Grade 12 as they realise that things are serious. One of the teachers also pointed to the improvement in English proficiency of learners who reach the higher grades. Teacher H10EFAL said: "In Grade 12 they become hard workers, more mature, they know what they want, work hard to achieve that goal. Mindset changes."

There is significant winnowing of the cohort towards matric. Recent research tracking the 2019 Grade 8 cohort showed that of the 815 844 pupils from six provinces who sat down at their Grade 8 desks to begin high school in 2019, 207 219 "disappeared" before reaching matric, 304 241 "progressed with repetition", and just 304 384 (37%) reached Grade 12 in 2023 without repeating any grades or departing from school system (Van der Berg et al.,, 2024).

Just over 60% of youth will obtain a matric as suggested in analysis of household survey data (DBE 2024a, Selkirk and Wills, 2024, p14), and the diminishing cohort are also likely more academically able and resilient. Schools still engage in a level of 'gatekeeping', which means preventing learners from proceeding to grade 12 despite having met requirements, albeit poorly, if they are likely to compromise a school's overall pass rate in the Matric examinations. For example, in the Western Cape, Selkirk (2025) finds a strong positive association between schools' Grade 11 repetition rates and their NSC pass rates[17].

National administrative data demonstrate that fee-paying and non-fee-paying schools in different provinces manage progression very differently, and repetition rates vary across grade levels and in relation to provincial averages. It is likely that schools have different strategies regarding learner flows and apply official policy differently. We found very different patterns of repetition and grade attainment across grades in our case study schools, especially the Quintile 1-3 township schools that were in many respects quite similar but with very different repetition rates across the grades.

Discussion

The nine points above show the multiple ways in which learners move through the system without necessarily mastering the content of each grade. At the broadest level, this is driven by political and economic imperatives. Politically, the NSC results are taken each year as a marker of national and provincial success in education delivery, and schools are under pressure from provinces to

[17] This is after controlling for Grade 11 cohorts' prior achievement on the Grade 9 systemic tests (along with other school and cohort controls).

ensure high pass rates. Economically, there is an efficiency imperative to limit the number of students in the system, especially repeaters. There are system-level, formal policies which facilitate progression, such as mark adjustments, Mathematics condonations, year-in-phase, relatively high SBA weightings and low assessment standards (as in EFAL). There are also school-level strategies that respond to the pressure to pass learners: rote preparation and coaching for examinations, marks inflation to pass thresholds and a focus on grades 10 -12 to the neglect of lower secondary students. At the student level, on the positive side, students often improve as they reach higher grades, including gaining knowledge and greater fluency in the LOLT. While learning trajectories may be quite flat, learning does improve across grades. This is seen, for example, in longitudinal studies tracking reading fluency among Grade 1 to 7 learners (Wills et al. 2022) or in the improvement in language and mathematics competencies[18] across Grade 6 and Grade 9 cohorts in the 2022 South African Systemic Evaluation (DBE, 2024b). Teachers in our study indicated that students are more motivated as they approach the prospect of getting through Matric.

There are strong features of social promotion in the system, and a high prevalence of progression without mastery, especially in Mathematics up to Grade 9. However, we also still have high rates of repetition, especially at the Grade 1, Grade 4, Grade 8 and Grade 10 levels (Van der Berg et al., 2024). We thus have a hybrid system, combining social promotion and grade retention. The hybrid system attempts to address a central, enduring tension between high levels of participation in the system and ensuring quality provision at an assured standard. Each year teachers face large numbers of academically underprepared learners in their classrooms and are under considerable pressure to ensure that many progress to the following grade despite not achieving grade-level standards. On the other hand, they respond to the rigorous assessment systems and rules in place that attempt to hold them, their schools and students accountable for learning at a particular standard.

Our interviews with teachers highlighted two key issues in this regard. One is that there is uneven understanding and implementation of promotion, progression and retention policies. This is confirmed by Erasmus and Fourie (2024) and Kika & Kotze (2019). Many teachers felt undermined by having to progress learners they thought should repeat. Teachers experienced a degree of demoralisation and threat to their professional judgement from pushing learners through 'just to the other side … where there is nothing'. Pressure to bend the rules, to ensure passing, comes down to teachers from principals, who are in turn under pressure from districts. It would seem that teachers are placed under enormous pressure, expected to mediate the tension between grade retention and social promotion, often without the requisite understanding of how the system is functioning and without necessary support.

The second issue is the absence of remediation systems in the early secondary grades. Our research, and other studies (Stott et al., 2015) show that given the focus on the later grades and intensive preparation for matric (National Senior Certificate), there is limited remediation in the earlier grades. When the promotion and progression policies were first introduced, there was a strong emphasis on remediation. For example, in the DBE (2012) promotion and progression policy and in provincial initiatives like the Free State's 2015 Plan of Action for the Progressed Learners 2015 And Beyond (DBE, 2015) detailed specifications are provided for: advocacy around the implications of progression; and targeted management of progressed learners including differentiation, support, testing, reporting, motivation, rewards and resource provision, at SMT, principal, student and teacher levels. This emphasis is not reflected in school-level practices so that we predominantly have a system of *social promotion without remediation.*

Although the current assessment system, including the NSC, SBAs and promotion requirements, has been important in stabilising the system, the pressure to pass appears to be undermining learning, through teaching to the test, examination cramming and gaming SBAs. The predictability

[18] Test scores between Grade 6 and 9 were vertically linked so that one can make vertical comparisons of competencies achieved across the Grade 6 and Grade 9 nationally representative samples.

of the matriculation examination papers and certain features that encourage rote learning (Ministerial Task Team, 2014) need to be addressed. Well-constructed assessments that reflect the substantive aims of the curriculum and foster deep intellectual engagement should be a guiding principle (Yates, 2013).

The DBE appears committed to interventions to improve learning outcomes (see Parliamentary Monitoring Group, March 2025), including assessment reform. Introducing higher stakes assessments earlier on in the system could encourage remediation in the lower grades. The introduction of the General Education Certificate (GEC) at the end of Grade 9 is a step in this direction and could be conceptualised less as a streaming mechanism (into the "three-stream model") and more as an accountability check for baseline levels of learning in key gateway subjects. The new South African Systemic Evaluation likewise will potentially provide standardised measurement and reporting on learning information earlier on. These earlier assessments could encourage more targeted support to learners and accountability for learning from schools, parents and learners in the earlier grades.

In the international research literature, the jury is out as to the benefits and disadvantages of the two policy choices of social promotion and grade retention (Goos et al. 2021; Valbuena et al. 2021). South Africa doesn't want a high retention system, not only because we don't want to reproduce colonial selective patterns (N'tchougan-Sonou, 2001) but also because it is expensive and doesn't support improved educational attainment or school completion (Branson et al., 2014). The pandemic experience revealed how improving flows through reduced grade repetition at the secondary school level can substantially support improved school completion (Selkirk and Wills, 2024). We also don't want a straight social promotion system because it potentially undermines a commitment to and delivery on important, agreed upon standards of learning. There is also new evidence in South Africa pointing to at least short to medium term benefits of repetition for foundational learning (Clayton, 2025; Wills, 2023). The hybrid system that we currently have, therefore, may be appropriate. But this requires clearer understanding across the system, to mitigate uneven application and in some cases bending of the rules to meet the pressure to pass. In addition, remediation in the system needs to be prioritised, especially in the earlier grades to reduce the pressure and need for just-in-time cramming in the final grades. Remediation requires upper limits on class sizes and appropriate support for teachers to do the work. Having made significant progress in relation to participation and attainment the system requires and is possibly ready for a concerted focus on quality. Or, in the South African system terms, less progression and more promotion to maintain the legitimacy and value of schooling, its qualifications and the learning it represents.

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