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Shock study on school literacy, numeracy

29 Jun 2011 | KARL GERNETZKY

Business Day

A countrywide assessment of grade 3 and grade 6 pupils has revealed shockingly low levels of literacy and numeracy.



Image: Gallo

The results of the annual national assessments, released by the Department of Basic Education yesterday, confirmed the findings of international studies that SA's primary-school pupils were struggling with basic literacy and numeracy.

In February, 6-million pupils from grades 1 to grade 7 wrote the tests, the first standardised measure of their grasp of language and mathematics.

The results point to systemic problems at some schools, which the department acknowledges. The literacy and numeracy of SA's pupils are among the lowest of their peers, despite the large sums spent on education each year.

Yesterday's assessment results represent a sample from 1800 schools which was moderated by panels of teachers and principals, and overseen by the Human Sciences Research Council.

The national average performance in grade 3 for literacy was 35%, and 28% for numeracy.

The Western Cape scored the highest with 43% for literacy and 36% for numeracy.

Mpumalanga came last with pupils scoring an average 27% and 19% respectively.

In grade 6, pupils achieved an average of 28% in languages, and 30% in mathematics. The Western Cape was again top with 40% in languages and 41% in mathematics, while Mpumalanga scored 20% and 25%.

Basic Education Minister Angie Motshekga said the results would serve as benchmarks. The target was a 60% average in literacy and mathematics at all schools by 2014. Ms Motshekga said the results offered a

comprehensive set of data for provinces to identify problem schools, and for schools to identify where their pupils were falling behind.

Referring to the decline in performance from grade 3 to grade 6, she said that the system was "not making kids dumber". The decline in results was due to the difficulty pupils had in switching from being taught in their home languages to English or Afrikaans in grade 4, and the increase from three subjects to eight.

Meanwhile, the CEO of the Federation of Governing Bodies of South African Schools, Paul Colditz, said the results were in line with what international studies "had been suggesting all along" — although a little worse than expected.

To break the cycle of illiteracy, the department should focus more on language, with "first prize" being the option for every child to complete their entire education in the language of their choice, he said.

The South African Democratic Teachers Union said yesterday that the "dismal, sobering" results would provide the teachers with information to assist them to diagnose problems and implement targeted interventions. The National Professional Teachers Organisation of SA said the results provide evidence that the education system was failing. Similar results from previous studies were seemingly not used to inform interventions that could have made a difference.

Brahm Fleisch, associate professor at Wits School of Education, said the decline between grade 3 and grade 6 was due to higher curriculum demands after grade 3, where less time was spent on literacy and numeracy. "These results will offer schools the ability to compare their results against benchmarked national standards, this could serve as an eye-opener for teacher who think they are doing just fine," he said.

With Sapa.

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