

High Dropout Rate a Problem for South Africa



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Experts say in addition to a high dropout rate, South Africa does not produce enough students with the skills for higher education in math and science. Students are shown outside the University of Johannesburg in January.

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Special English Education Report.

Since the nineteen nineties, education has been required for all South Africans from age seven to fifteen. Last December, the government announced that seventy percent of students passed their final examination to finish high school. In two thousand eight the passage rate was about sixty-three percent. There have been increases each year since then.

Professor Shireen Motala at the University of Johannesburg says access to basic education is no longer the problem in South Africa. She says most children stay in school until they are about sixteen. The problem now, she says, is that large numbers of them leave without completing high school.

Students take an examination known as the matric in grade twelve, their final or "matriculation" year. Professor Motala notes that less than half the children who started school in two thousand sat for the matric last year.

SHIREEN MOTALA: "Only, I think, around forty-five percent survived, which means that a large number of children are falling by the wayside. And the concern is that where do those learners actually go to."

South Africa has a twenty-four percent unemployment rate. Those who drop out must compete with better educated people for jobs.

Educational researchers also point to another problem. They say South African schools do not produce enough students with the skills for higher education in math and science.

One of those researchers is Graeme Bloch. He says many schools are not well-equipped.

GRAEME BLOCH: "The reality of poverty and resources, that children do not see laboratories and as a result, or partly as a result, their science marks are not very good. They do not have libraries at school. Ninety-two percent of the schools do not have libraries."

Also, education specialists say in many cases, teachers and school principals do not have the skills or training to do their jobs. In other cases, they are simply not doing their duty to provide an education.

Professor Motala says a number of teachers were poorly trained during the system of apartheid, or racial separation in South Africa. Apartheid ended in nineteen ninety-four.

Secondly, she says, teachers have been confused by the many educational reform efforts in the last fifteen years. And, finally, she thinks language differences in the classroom have not gotten as much attention as they should.

SHIREEN MOTALA: "There is the big issue of language, which we have not taken enough cognizance of, which I think is a huge problem."

Subjects such as math and science are taught in English starting at about age ten. But South Africa has eleven official languages and many more unofficial ones.

South Africa's minister of basic education promises a number of improvements. Angie Motshega says teacher development efforts will focus on subject and content knowledge, and making sure the correct teachers are in the correct jobs.

And that's the VOA Special English Education Report. I'm Bob Doughty.

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