

Consolidating gains made in maths, science a priority for 2013

PRETORIA: Consolidating the gains made in mathematics and science, increasing Bachelor's passes and a renewed focus on senior and intermediate phases will be among the Department of Basic Education's priorities in 2013.

Speaking at *The New Age* Business Breakfast briefing in Sandton on Friday morning, 18 January 2013, Basic Education Minister Angie Motshekga highlighted that the recently released results of the 2011 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) testing for South Africa pointed to large improvements in the mathematics and science competencies of Grade 9 learners when compared to Grade 9 learners tested in 2002.

"This is good news for South Africa. South Africa's improvement in mathematics of 67 TIMSS points between 2002 and 2011, or 7 points per year on average, is among the steepest seen by any TIMSS participant. Only Ghana has seen a steeper improvement over this period.

"My analysts in the department tell me that our improvement is comparable to that experienced in the last decade by Brazil, probably the fastest and most consistent improver in any international testing system in recent years. Similar things can be said about our science results," Motshekga said.

However, she warned that while this was good news and that it meant the tide had been turned, it did not mean that the department was seeing the results it should in schools as yet.

"We are at last taking great strides in the right direction, but we have a long way to go. Educational improvement, we should remind ourselves, is a gradual and painstaking process, but we have made a critical start."

She noted that the department had improved the country's average results while improving completion of Grade 9 among young South Africans. In 2002, around 80% of young South Africans were completing Grade 9 and by 2011 the figure increased to 88%.

Among the country's progress towards improving education quality, Motshekga noted that between 2002 and now, the percentage of publicly employed educators with at least a three-year post-matric qualification increased from 80% to 96%.

Non-personnel current spending per learner quadrupled between 2000 and 2010 in real inflation-adjusted terms, allowing for more spending education resources such as learner support materials and learner support services such as school nutrition and other inputs needed for successful schooling to occur.

Another progress is the curriculum, which she said has become clearer and more relevant over the last decade.

"Since the launch of Foundations for Learning, there have been a series of initiatives to set clearer standards and to monitor schools through standardised assessments, culminating in our newly introduced Annual National Assessments (ANA) programme.

"Poverty reduction strategies outside the ambit of education have also made a difference. In 2002, 25% of the households our learners lived in did not have electricity, by 2011, that figure had dropped to 13%. This meant an additional one and a half million learners were able to do their homework at night with the aid of an electric light.

"Through our Khari kude, Abet and matric re-write programmes, more adult South Africans have become more educated over time. Learning outcomes should at last be moving in the right direction, and strongly so, means that consistent attention to improving the quality of basic education, the first priority among government's twelve current high-level priorities, has paid off," Motshekga said.

The minister said the results over the past four years in the matric pass rate and in the Annual National Assessments, with further evidence of improvement in TIMMS, showed progress.

"In 2012, these gains were made across the board, including in the two provinces under administration - Limpopo and the Eastern Cape. In 2012, more learners passed matric and the pass rate increased, with encouraging increases in learners equipped to pursue post-schooling opportunities. [A total of] 377 829 learners out of 511 152, passed matric. This is an increase of 29 712 learners on the 2011 results (348 117).

"In 2009 the national average pass rate was 60.6%, in 2010 it was 67.8% and in 2011 it was 70.2%. In 2012 it was 73.9%, we achieved far in excess of a 100 000 distinctions. When I visited Gauteng during their matric results announcement, they announced that they achieved more than 35 000 distinctions in the province."

These improvements, sustained as they are, are a clear consequence of systemic interventions for strengthening and raising performance in all levels of the system. "They show we've turned the Titanic around."

On the concerns about the pass requirements for matric, Motshekga said that a Ministerial Committee had been set up to look again into the matter and give international comparisons, to sustain confidence in the country's qualifications.

Giving an update on the textbooks, Motshekga said that the department had prioritised provision and utilisation of Learner Teacher Support Material. Last year, workbooks were supplied to all learners in Grades 1 to 9 and also delivered, with the Shuttleworth Foundation, over four million supplementary textbooks to Grade 10-12 learners for maths and physics.

From this year the department will also tackle the shortage of titles for African Languages.

"As part of our contribution to promoting social cohesion and inclusiveness in society, the policy on the incremental introduction of African Languages will be piloted in all provinces to inform the implementation plan for Grade 1.

"Teacher development, deployment and utilisation are also at the heart of our priorities. We want seriously to improve professionalism, teaching skills and teacher subject-knowledge. Among other things, we will ensure that the sector corrects the Post Provisioning Norms that deal with the distribution of teachers, and other HR-related challenges to ensure there's no class without a teacher.

On schools infrastructure, Motshekga said the department had launched the National School Build Programme under the Presidential Infrastructure Coordinating Committee to specifically address national backlogs in classrooms, libraries, computer labs, media centres and admin buildings while embracing long-term infrastructure planning and budgeting for education.

Under government's Strategic Integrated Programme 13, she said they were working on two national programmes, the

provincially driven programme with a national budget of R8.5 billion and the Accelerated Schools Infrastructure Delivery Initiative, with R8.2 billion allocated to the programme of which R3.1 billion had already been committed within projects being implemented.

In addition, the department has put together a national strategy for the maintenance of public ordinary schools.

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