

How do South Africans feel about education, schools and the benefits of matric in South Africa?

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Research Surveys, in conjunction with e-tv, conducted a telephone study amongst South Africans in metropolitan areas probing their attitudes and perceptions about the state of education in South Africa.

In a telephone study conducted by RS, South Africa's leading marketing insights company, in conjunction with e-tv for their "Judge for Yourself" programme (Mondays at 19h30) amongst a sample of 500 SA adults in metropolitan areas who had access to a landline telephone at the beginning of January 2005, attitudes and perceptions of South Africans about the state of education in South Africa were probed.

Some harsh words about education in South Africa

People in the sample interviewed had quite harsh things to say about the state of education in South Africa. People were asked to agree or disagree with each of the following:

- "Education in South Africa is in a crisis"

Agree - 62%

Disagree - 33%

Don't know - 4%

- "The standard of education is falling in South Africa"

Agree - 61%

Disagree - 34%

Don't know - 5%

A possible reason for this perception is contained in the majority view that government has changed direction too often:

- "The government has changed its education policy too often in the last ten years"

Agree - 76%

Disagree - 14%

Don't know - 9%

Looking back over the last ten years, though, there is more ambivalence:

- "Schools today are better than they were ten years ago"

Agree - 48%

Disagree - 46%

Don't know - 6%

Very often, when looking at such issues, South Africa's past means that responses are different for different race groups. This does apply here, but there are perhaps surprising levels of agreement across different race groups on a few of these issues: surprising in the light of the appalling state of the education system under apartheid:

- Responses are very similar across race groups for the view concerning the government's too frequent policy shifts in education.

- However, differences do occur for the feeling that education is in a crisis (blacks - 51%; Indians and whites - 66%; coloureds - 75%). Is the Western Cape education system in particular crisis? Three-quarters of those in Cape Town feel that education is in a crisis and that the standard of education is falling.
- On the question of the standard of education falling, three out of four Indians, whites and coloureds feel this is the case compared to only four out of ten blacks.
- There is some good news, though, from the black population: 77% feel that schools are better now than ten years ago, compared with 38% of Indians and coloureds and only 25% of whites.

What is the net result of these views?

First, many people feel that the children of government ministers should be in state schools:

- "Government ministers should be forced to send their children to government schools"

Agree - 54%

Disagree - 42%

Don't know - 4%

This view was held by two out of three Indians and coloureds, and about a half of blacks and whites. It would be interesting to know how many ministers do send their children to state schools. Secondly, by a two-to-one ratio, people voted to send their own children to a private school:

- "If you could, you would rather send your child to a private school than to a government school"

Agree - 64%

Disagree - 32%

Don't know - 4%

This is the majority view of all race groups, especially coloureds and whites: seven out of ten coloureds and whites voted this way, compared with 55% of blacks and Indians.

Perhaps most alarmingly (though this is also a function of the unemployment situation and the intense competition for jobs that is a result), people do not place much value on a matric certificate when it comes to getting a job - and this was a view echoed by all race groups to much the same extent:

- "A matric certificate doesn't help you get a job"

Agree - 76%

Disagree - 20%

Don't know - 3%

In summary

Given the shortage of skills in South Africa, these views are of considerable concern. Although there is some very good news in the feelings about the improvement in schools over the last ten years, especially amongst blacks, it is clear that considerable improvement is still necessary. There is a clear perception that government has changed direction too often and people may feel that it is time for strong direction, consolidation and clarity. The issue of private vs. state schools is contentious, and people feel that government ministers should show confidence in the system that they run by sending their own children to government schools.

The lack of confidence in a matric certificate is very concerning and has serious long-term implications for the economy.

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