

Children's access to education

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Section 29(1)(a) of the South African Constitution¹ states that “everyone has the right to a basic education”, and section 29(1)(b) says that “everyone has the right to further education”, and that the state must make such education “progressively available and accessible”.

Article 11(3)(a) of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child² says “States Parties to the present Charter shall take all appropriate measures with a view to achieving the full realisation of this right and shall in particular ... provide free and compulsory basic education”.

Article 28 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child³ recognises “the right of the child to education” and also obliges the state to “make primary education compulsory and available free to all”.

The number and proportion of children living far from school

This indicator reflects the distance from a child's household to the school s/he attends. Distance is measured through a proxy indicator: length of time travelled to reach the school attended, which is not necessarily the school nearest to the child's household. The school the child attends is defined as “far” if a child would have to travel more than 30 minutes to reach it, irrespective of mode of transport. Children aged 7 – 13 are defined as primary school age, and children aged 14 – 17 are defined as secondary school age.

Access to schools and other educational facilities is a necessary condition for achieving the right to education. A school's location and distance from home may pose a barrier to education. Access to schools is also hampered by poor roads, transport that is unavailable or unaffordable, and danger along the way. Risks may be different for

young children, for girls and boys, and are likely to be greater when children travel alone.

For children who do not have schools near their homes, the cost, risk and effort of getting to school can influence decisions about regular attendance, as well as participation in extramural activities and after-school events. Those who travel long distances to reach school may wake very early and risk arriving late or physically exhausted, which may affect their ability to learn. Walking long distances to school may also lead to learners being excluded from class or attending school irregularly.⁴

Three-quarters of South Africa's learners walk to school, while 9% use public transport. Less than 2% report using school buses or transport provided by the government. The vast majority (76%) of White children are driven to school in private cars, compared with only 6% of Black



children.⁵ These figures provide a picture of pronounced disparities in child mobility and means of access to school.

Assuming that schools primarily serve the children living in the community surrounding them, the ideal indicator to measure physical access to school would be the distance from the child's household to the nearest school. This analysis is no longer possible due to question changes in the General Household Survey. Instead this indicator shows the number and proportion of children who travel far (more than 30 minutes) to reach the actual school that they attend, even if it is not the closest school. School-age children not attending school are therefore excluded from the analysis.

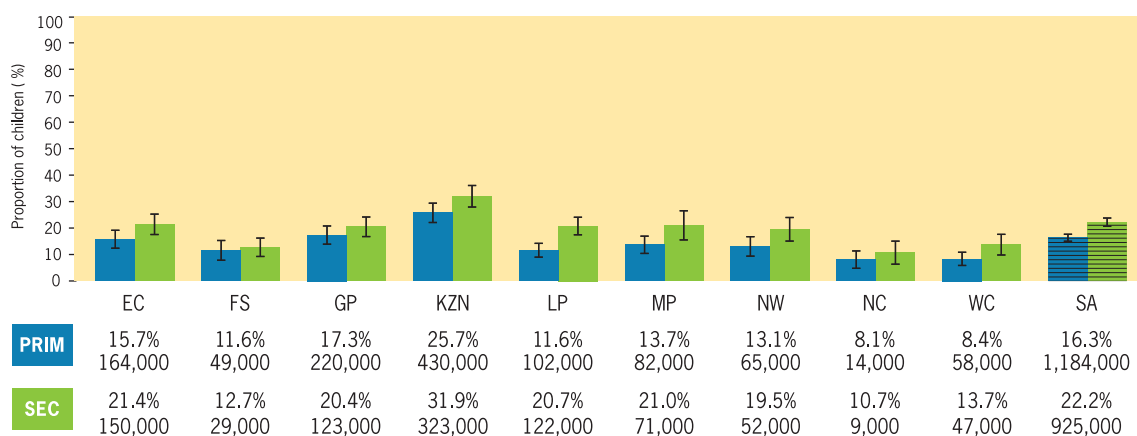
Overall, the vast majority (82%) of the 11.4 million children of school-going age travel less than 30 minutes to reach school, and most learners (86%) attend their nearest school.⁶ However, approximately 1.5 million learners do not attend their nearest school. Gauteng and the Western Cape provinces have the highest proportion (21% each) of children who do not attend the school nearest to their home. The main reasons for not attending the nearest school relate to the quality of education, and reflect educational aspirations and schooling preferences.⁷ School-fee exemptions aim to remove financial obstacles to education in fee-charging schools and in theory make it possible for children living in poor areas to attend better schools further away.

In mid-2009 there were 7.3 million children of primary school age (7 – 13 years) in South Africa; of these, one in six (16%) travelled more than 30 minutes to get to school. The highest proportions of children living far from the primary school they attend are in KwaZulu-Natal (26%), Gauteng (17%) and the Eastern Cape (16%).

Children of secondary school age are more likely than primary school learners to travel far to reach school. In South Africa, 4.2 million children are of secondary school age, and roughly one in five (22%) travel more than 30 minutes to get to school. KwaZulu-Natal (32%), Mpumalanga (21%), Limpopo (21%) and the Eastern Cape (21%) provinces have relatively high proportions of teenage children who have to travel far to school.

Access to school remains a problem for many children in South Africa, particularly those living in more remote areas where public transport to schools is lacking or inadequate and where households are often unable to afford transport for children to get to school.⁸ Many rural schools have merged or closed since 2002, making the situation worse for children in these areas. For instance, the number of ordinary schools dropped by 31% in the Free State, by 23% in the North West, by 14% in Limpopo, and by 6% in the Eastern Cape. Countrywide, the number of schools dropped by 6% from 27,647 schools in 2002 to 25,867 in 2009. Over the same period, the number of learners increased by nearly 300,000.⁹

Table 4a: Number and proportion of children living far from their primary/secondary school, 2009



Source: Statistics South Africa (2010) *General Household Survey 2009*. Pretoria: Stats SA. Analysis by Rutendo Murambiwa & Katharine Hall, Children's Institute, UCT.

Notes: ① School-age children are defined as people aged 7 – 17 years; primary school-age children are defined as 7 – 13 years; secondary school-age children are defined as 14 – 17 years. ② Population numbers are rounded off to the nearest thousand. ③ Strengths and limitations of the data are described on pp. 104 – 106. ④ The confidence intervals, shown on the graph as a vertical line at the top of each bar, represent the range into which the true value may fall. See p. 77 for more details on confidence intervals. ⑤ See www.childrencount.ci.org.za for more information.

Number and proportion of children attending an educational institution

This indicator reflects the number and proportion of children aged 7 – 17 years who are reported to be attending a school or educational facility. This is different from “enrolment rate”, which reflects the number of children enrolled in educational institutions, as reported by schools to the national department early in the school year.

Education is a central socio-economic right that provides the foundation for lifelong learning and economic opportunities. In South Africa, basic education is compulsory in grades 1 – 9, or for children aged 7 – 15. Children who have completed basic education also have a right to further education (grades 10 – 12), which government must take reasonable measures to make available.

South Africa has high levels of school enrolment and attendance. Amongst children of school-going age (7 – 17 years) the vast majority (97%) attended some form of educational facility in 2009 – slightly but significantly up from 95% in 2002. Of a total of 11.4 million children aged 7 – 17 years, 370,000 were reported as not attending school in 2009. There are always concerns about the reliability of reported attendance figures in surveys, especially when the respondent is not necessarily the caregiver of the child – as is the case in the General Household Survey. However, reported attendance rates from the survey are very similar to actual attendance rates recorded in the Department of Basic Education’s Snap Survey of learners, which takes place in every school in the country early in the school year. The department reports a total of 11.8 million children attending

school in 2009 (this includes children in grade R and learners over the age of 17).

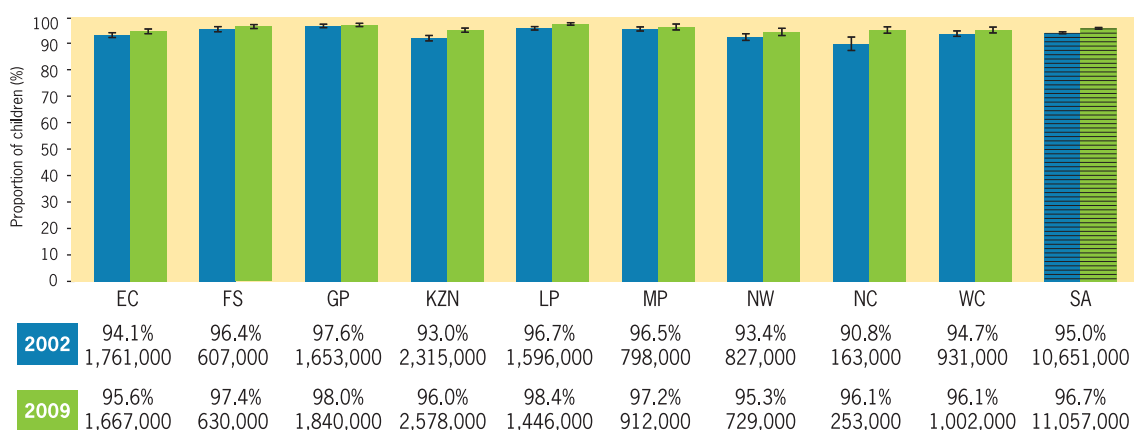
Despite the already high levels of attendance, there have been significant increases in attendance rates in some provinces – notably KwaZulu-Natal (an increase of three percentage points, from 93% in 2002 to 96% in 2009) and the Northern Cape (from 91% in 2002 to 96% in 2009).

There have been small but real increases in reported attendance rates for African and Coloured children over the eight-year period from 2002, and by 2009 there were no significant differences between attendance rates for African and White children. Attendance rates for Coloured children remained slightly below the national average.

Overall attendance rates tend to mask the problem of drop out among older children. Analysis of attendance among discrete age groups shows a significant drop in attendance amongst children older than 14, and this increases with age. Whereas 99% of 13-year-olds were reported to be attending an educational institution in 2008, the attendance rate dropped to 98% and 96% for 14- and 15-year-olds respectively. As schooling is compulsory until the age of 15 or the end of grade 9, the attendance rate decreases more steeply from age 16 onwards, with 93% of 16-year-olds, 85% of 17-year-olds, and 72% of 18-year-olds reported to be attending school.

There is no significant difference in drop-out rates between boys and girls. Cost of education is the main reason for non-attendance in the high school age group, followed by a perception that “education is useless”.¹⁰

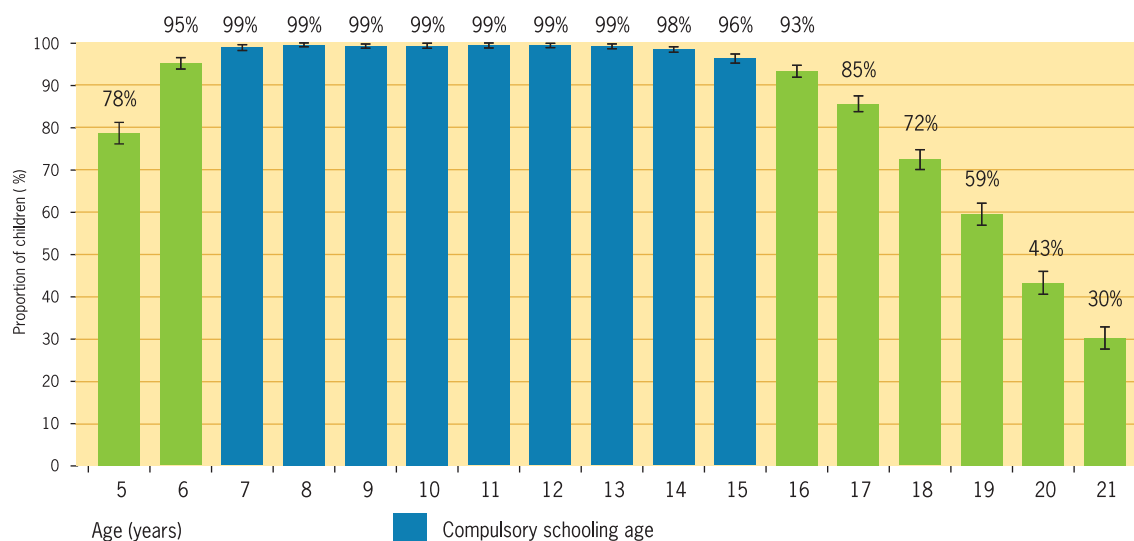
Table 4b: Number and proportion of school-age children attending an educational institution, 2002 & 2009



Sources: Statistics South Africa (2003; 2010) *General Household Survey 2002; General Household Survey 2009*. Pretoria: Stats SA. Analysis by Katharine Hall and Rutendo Murambiwa, Children’s Institute, UCT.

Notes: ① School-age children are defined as people aged 7 – 17 years. ② Population numbers are rounded off to the nearest thousand. ③ Strengths and limitations of the data are described on pp. 104 – 106. ④ The confidence intervals, shown on the graph as a vertical line at the top of each bar, represent the range into which the true value may fall. See p. 77 for more details on confidence intervals. ⑤ See www.childrencount.ci.org.za for more information.

Table 4c: Reported attendance at an educational institution by age, 2009



Source: Statistics South Africa (2010) *General Household Survey 2009*. Pretoria: StatsSA.
Analysis by Katharine Hall and Rutendo Murambiwa, Children's Institute, UCT

Other reasons for drop out are illness and exam failure. Pregnancy accounts for around 15% of drop-out amongst teenage girls who are not attending school (95% CI: 9.9 – 19.3%, which means that the real proportion could fall anywhere between these upper and lower bounds).¹¹ This amounts to 1% of all girls of secondary school age (14 – 17 years). Teenage girls are more likely to drop out of high school due to financial constraints (and 26% of teenage girls who drop out of school do so for this reason). Contrary to the perception that pregnancy leads to school drop-out, pregnancy is more likely to occur after learners have left the school system.¹²

It is encouraging to note that 78% of five-year-olds were attending pre-school or grade R in 2009. This suggests an advance – in numeric terms at least – towards the government's goal to have universal access to grade R by 2014.

Attendance rates alone do not capture the regularity of children's school attendance, or their progress through

school. Research has shown that children from more “disadvantaged” backgrounds – ie with limited economic resources, lower levels of parental education, or who have lost one or both parents – are less likely to enrol in school and are more likely to drop out or progress slowly than their more advantaged peers.¹³ A national survey on access to education¹⁴ found that only 14% of learners were absent for more than five days during the school year. Educator strikes resulted in learner absenteeism for large numbers of learners but for short periods of time. The main reasons for longer absences were illness, poor weather conditions and floods.

High levels of school attendance do not say much about the quality of teaching and learning that takes place in school. Systemic evaluations by the Department of Education have recorded very low pass rates in numeracy and literacy amongst both grade 3 and grade 6 learners.¹⁵

References

- 1 Constitution of the Republic of South Africa. Act 108 of 1996.
- 2 Secretary General of the Organisation of the African Union (1990) *African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child*, OAU Resolution 21.8/49. Addis Ababa: OAU.
- 3 Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights (1989) *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, UN General Assembly Resolution 44/25. Geneva: United Nations.
- 4 Strassburg S, Meny-Gilbert S & Russell B (2010) *Left Unfinished: Temporary Absence and Drop-Out from South African Schools*. Findings from the Access to Education Study, Vol. 2. Johannesburg: Social Surveys Africa & Centre for Applied Legal Studies.
- 5 Statistics South Africa (2010) *General Household Survey 2009*. Pretoria: Stats SA. Analysis by Katharine Hall, Children's Institute, UCT.
- 6 See no. 5 above.
- 7 See no. 5 above.
- 8 See no. 4 above.
- 9 Department of Education (2004) *Education Statistics in South Africa at a Glance in 2002*. Pretoria: DOE;
- 10 Department of Basic Education (2009) *School Realities 2009*. Pretoria: DBE.
- 10 See no. 5 above.
- 11 See no. 5 above.
- 12 Panday S, Makiwane M, Ranchod C & Letsoalo T (2009) *Teenage pregnancy in South Africa – With a Specific Focus on School-Going Learners*. Child, Youth, Family and Social Development, Human Sciences Research Council. Pretoria: Department of Basic Education.
- 13 Crouch L (2005) *Disappearing Schoolchildren or Data Misunderstanding? Dropout phenomena in South Africa*. North Carolina, USA: RTI International;
- 14 Lam D & Seekings J (2005) *Transitions to Adulthood in Urban South Africa: Evidence from a Panel Survey*. Prepared for the International Union for the Scientific Study of Population (IUSSP) General Conference, Tours, France, 18 – 23 July 2005.
- 14 See no. 4 above.
- 15 Department of Basic Education (2011) *Report on the Annual National Assessments of 2011*. Pretoria: DBE.