

Improved Education Performance Big Step towards Vision 2030

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The Social Protection, Community and Human Development Cluster has commended the advances made to improve the state of education in South Africa.

The Human Sciences Research Council recently released the results of South Africa's participation in the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), which show a steady but upward trajectory of the education sector.

"We are a leading African participant among 59 countries in TIMSS 2015. Our participation in internationally benchmarked studies provides valuable and credible information that... affirms the upward trajectory in the sector, evidenced by improved Mathematics and Science skills, better schooling conditions and decreasing inequality in education communities," said Social Development Minister Bathabile Dlamini on Monday.

She was chairing the Social Cluster briefing on progress made in the second quarter towards achieving the goals of the National Development Plan (NDP): Vision 2030.

Minister Dlamini said values and targets set in the NDP "embolden us to strive for academic excellence in prioritised areas of Mathematics and Science".

"This independent study gives an encouraging account of how we measure up in a widely recognised international testing programme aimed largely at assessing whether countries are making progress in education over time.

"As government we are very pleased with the consistent improvements we have seen in the TIMSS results," the Minister said.

TIMSS report outcomes

TIMSS performance from 2003 to 2015 shows that there was a significant improvement of 87 points for Mathematics and 90 points for Science, more than for any other country with comparable data.

In a statement after the TIMSS results were released on 29 November 2016, Basic Education Minister Angie Motshekga said improved TIMSS scores should be viewed in the context of concentrated efforts and support provided in the senior phase.

"Historically, this phase has been a challenge for the sector. The 2014 ANA [Annual National Assessment] results showed that while there were noteworthy improvements in lower grades, the senior phase was challenged in not delivering the expected progress against targets we had set ourselves.

“Therefore, in 2015, the year that we participated in TIMSS, we had to fast-track support to identified schools and districts where large numbers of learners were considered underperforming.

“At the same time, the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) has provided stability in the sector by giving teachers clear guidelines on content, pedagogy and assessment and this has positively influenced learner performance in these phases,” the Minister said at the time.

At the Grade 9 level, the TIMSS 2015 results show that there were noteworthy improvements at the lower and top end of achievement scores. The highest gains were achieved by learners at the lower end and the encouraging news is that 3.2% of Mathematics learners and 4.9% of Science learners can be categorised at the high levels of achievement (i.e. scoring over 550 points).

“Basically this means that we are seeing the gap between the lower performing schools and higher performing schools getting smaller. This is a huge step in the right direction in terms of improving equality in education,” said Minister Motshekga.

At the Grade 5 level, performance in the TIMSS Numeracy (TIMSS-N) study was below 400 points. However, Minister Motshekga said this represents an important baseline from which the department can harness valuable data on fundamental mathematical knowledge, procedures and problem-solving strategies of learners in the intermediate phase of schooling.

The profile of data at this level will assist the sector to identify areas where basic mathematical knowledge can be improved.

Help for disadvantaged schools

Minister Motshekga said while there have been improvements in terms of equality, the differences are still stark.

“Government has a concentrated pro-poor strategy to support schools in Quintiles 1 to 3 (no-fee paying schools). We have to strengthen our efforts as a sector to close the differentiated gap in performance between public no-fee paying schools and public fee paying schools, in favour of raising performance in poorer schooling communities,” she said.

The results by province also show quite an interesting pattern. The analysis showed that since 2003, Limpopo had the highest Grade 9 average score increase, by more than 100 points, in Mathematics and Science. Two provinces have historically jostled and competed for top spot. Gauteng had the highest scores at Grade 9, achieving above 400 points, while Western Cape had the top position at Grade 5.

Home environment impacts learner performance

A particularly valuable set of information from the study is how learners live and learn. There is sufficient evidence in the study to suggest that the home

environment is an important socio-economic factor that cannot be ignored in impacting learning and performance.

“An intriguing finding of the report is that the educational level of parents in South Africa has considerably improved between 2003 and 2015, especially in Gauteng, which increased from 26% to 48%, while in the Western Cape, the observed pattern was the opposite. This may be an area of further investigation and we need to better understand the educational context of parents and their children migrating to Gauteng.

“We know that research on education suggests that parental involvement actually influences educational outcomes and learners profit from this involvement. The TIMSS data suggests that Gauteng may be benefitting from a migration of educated parents, who take up jobs in the province,” said Minister Motshekga. – **SAnews.gov.za**

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