

Management & Leadership

POLICY

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for South African Schools

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SM&L

is published 10 times per year by Ednews. It is editorially and financially independent and it is not affiliated to any organisation. It seeks to provide the leaders of South African schools with current and relevant information on issues of policy, leadership, management and governance.

Can we learning anything from the 2009 NSC Examination results?

This first issue of **SM&L** for the 2010 year is devoted largely to the results of the 2009 National Senior Certificate examinations. We do this purposefully at the start of each year because these examinations are one of the few simple and relatively easily understood measures of the performance and organisational health of our schooling system.

In our analysis of the 2009 NSC results we have tried to look beyond simplistic indicators (such as pass rates) to the underlying data that influence these rates. This deeper analysis makes it possible for us to provide you with a more detailed and coherent picture of the strengths and weaknesses of the teaching and learning in our schools and the extent to which teaching and learning at classroom and school level is being supported at district, provincial and national level. This has not been easy because although the DoBE's report on the 2009 NSC Examinations provides a huge amount of data, it is in our view, rather thin on the detail that matters. Examples of this are the absence of data such as the averages and medians for each subject, and of symbol distributions by Achievement Level for each subject. The mark distribution data that the document does provide, sorts the results of subjects into just three levels – Not achieved (below 30%), Achieved with more than 30%, and Achieved with more than 40%. We have approached both the DoBE and the WCED in an effort to obtain this data, which we consider to be a valuable source of comparative data for schools as they go about the process of analysing their own results. Both departments have been rather coy in their response to these requests and although promises have been made nothing, as yet, has come of our request.

Despite the unhelpfulness of the DoBE and the WCED in terms of providing us with the additional data that we have sought, our analysis has revealed information that we believe will be of interest and value to our readers and particularly to the principals of high schools who are looking to improve the future performance of their schools in the NSC examinations. Our analysis has also revealed some very serious flaws in the 2009 Physical Sciences results and questions need to be asked about their validity. You can read about what we discovered in our article *Physical Sciences - Who dropped the ball?* starting on page 7. We are grateful to those of our readers who alerted us to this problem and also to those who provided us with useful additional data which helped us to demonstrate the impact the Physical Science results have had on individual schools.

This issue also includes some further information about the status of the implementation of the Recommendation of Ministerial Task Team investigating the Implementation of the National Curriculum Statement. We carried extensive coverage of this Report and the recommendations of this task team in the last few editions of **SM&L** for 2009. Some of these recommendations now have legal

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2009 NSC Results

Whatever happened to the ogive curve?

Our analysis of the 2009 National Senior Certificate results reveals interesting - and in some instances disturbing - trends. This has led us to speculate about the processes used to adjust the marks.

Many teachers will have included an element of statistics or statistical method as part of their training and during these courses would have come across terms such as average, median and standard deviation. They may also have stared, often quite blankly, at graphs with names like ogive, bell and normative distribution curves. Most probably remember very little of what they were taught and the only use they are now likely to make of what they learned is when they calculate a class or grade average for their subject or set. The term "bell curve" may trigger some memories of a graph that looked a bit like a bell and that was used to illustrate things such as the manner in which the heights of people vary in a population, with most clustered in the middle around a point which represented the average height for the population while the rest were scattered towards the fringes, with fewer and fewer individuals falling into the more extreme categories of shortness and tallness. Teachers may also remember that this kind of a curve was used to explain the distribution of IQ across the population with the median IQ for the population set at 100. There would also have been talk about the use of these curves and of other statistical methods in the mark adjustment process that forms an inevitable part of the Senior Certificate examination.

The need to adjust marks at national level as a means of ensuring that pass rates, subject averages and the

manner in which marks are distributed are reasonably consistent from year to year is an essential part of any national assessment system. The great value of having standards that are consistent from year to year is that they become benchmarks for schools, for employers, for universities and other post-school training institutions, and also for individual candidates. It is also important for everyone that a pass or a mark of 63% in one year is seen to be the equivalent to a similar mark scored in past year and future years. A reliable assessment system makes it possible for principals to use this information to compare and measure their schools' performance in terms of pass rates and the proportion of pupils who pass at each achievement level. This same information can also be

We have provided a number of charts on this and the following pages to illustrate what we have learned from our analysis and hope that you will find them useful. We have included a reasonably detailed explanation of the relationship that each chart is intended to illustrate below the caption. This same information has been given to Prof. John Volmink, the Chairman of Umalusi, and we have invited him to respond to our comments and concerns. This he has generously agreed to do.

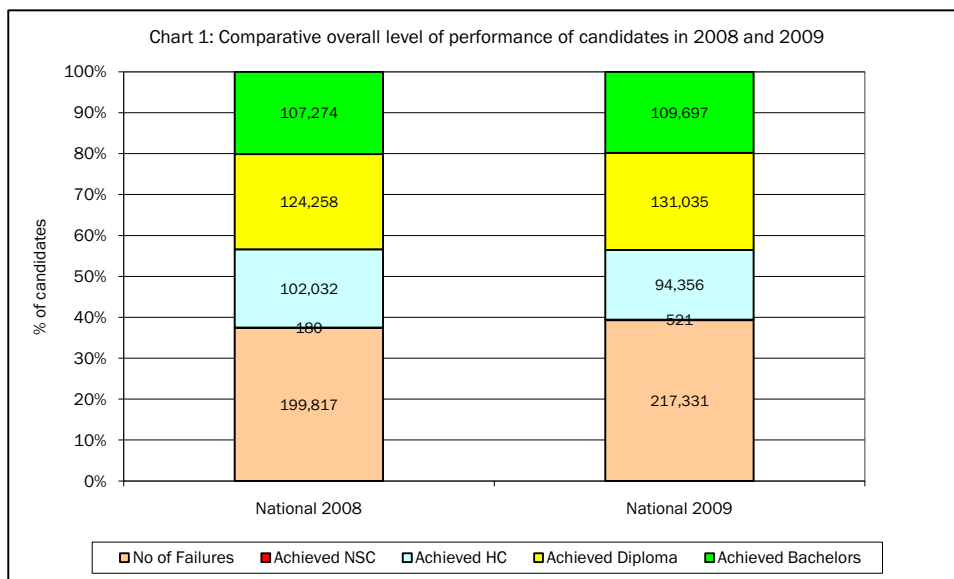


Chart 1: Comparative overall level of performance of candidates in 2008 and 2009

This chart shows the number of candidates who failed and the number of candidates who passed at each level of achievement. The results are very similar in all categories except 2 - 7 676 fewer candidates achieved a Higher Certificate pass in 2009 than in 2008 while 6 777 more candidates achieved a Diploma level pass. This change is illustrated more clearly in Chart 2.

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used to measure the performance of subject departments and even individual teachers. Tracking pass rates, subject averages and symbol distributions helps principals to determine whether the school is improving academically, whether its performance is static, or whether it is going backwards. Underperforming subject departments and teachers can be called to account if their pupils have performed poorly and they can be asked not only to explain poor performance but also to suggest remedies which will

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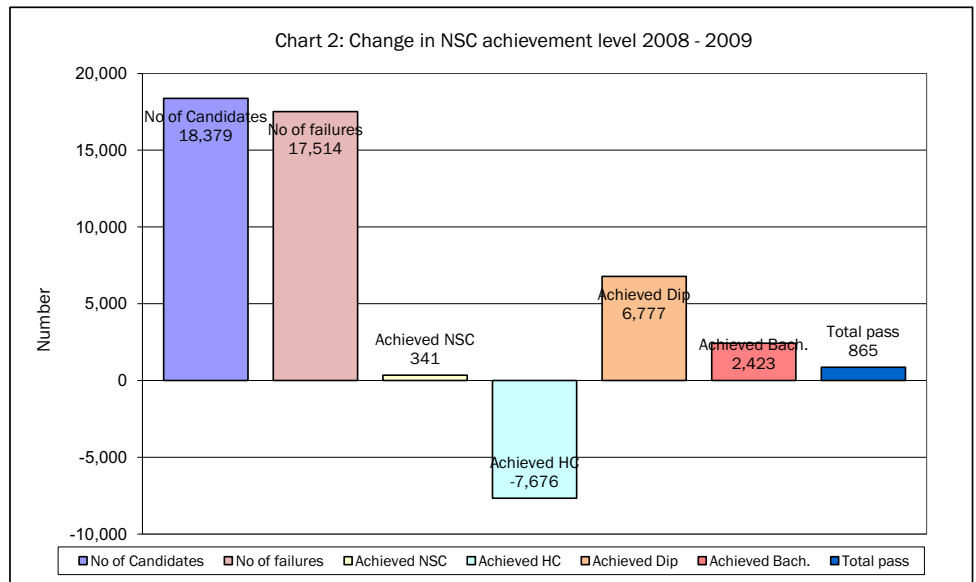


Chart 2: Change in NSC achievement level 2008 - 2009

The number of candidates who wrote the examination in 2009 was 18 379 more than in 2008. Disappointingly, this increase was almost completely nullified by the fact that there were 17 514 more failures in 2009 than in 2008 which meant that in total, just 865 more candidates passed the examination in 2009 than 2008. It also means that the pass rate for this bottom group was of the order of 5%.

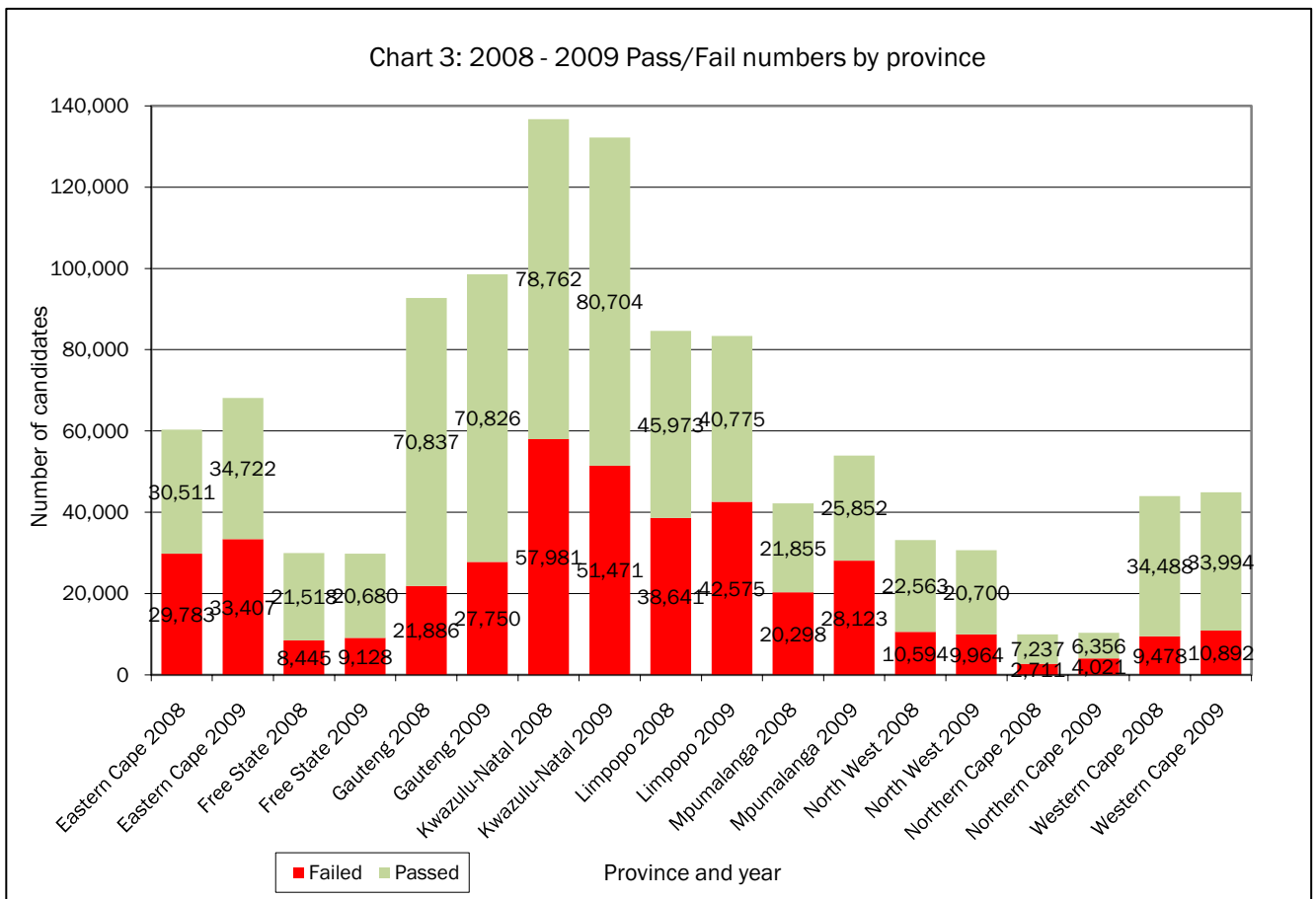


Chart 3: 2008 - 2009 Pass/Fail numbers by province

This chart shows the number of candidates who failed and passed in each province for 2008 and 2009 and illustrates the relative proportion of candidates who passed and failed in each province in each of the two years. It also illustrates quite clearly that the majority of candidates complete their schooling in KwaZulu-Natal, Gauteng and Limpopo.

bring about improvement in the future. Those whose pupils have performed well, however, can be commended on their efforts and encouraged to share their expertise with their peers. Universities can use reliable assessment data to determine admission criteria, and as part of their selection processes for specific courses, - particularly those courses which require high levels of competence in subjects like Mathematics, Physical Science or a language. The same applies to employers, who are likely to base employment decisions about applicants who are entering the job market for the first time, at least partly on their results in the NSC examinations. The assumptions underpinning all of this, however, are that there is a consistency in the standard of the examinations, and in the marking, moderation and mark adjustment process.

With the NSC now having provided a second tranche of data we decided to spend some time analysing the data to see what kinds of patterns of performance would emerge beyond the simplistic focus on pass rates and in identifying the top and failing schools, which

form the bulk of what is published in the press in the immediate aftermath of the release of the NSC results. We soon found that this was more difficult than we had imagined because of our inability to get access to a more detailed breakdown of results than was contained in the DoBEs report¹ on the 2009 National Senior Certificate examinations. This report, which was released towards the end of January, provides subject data at only three levels of performance, namely “below 30% (failed)”, “30% - 40%”, and “40% and above”. Try as we might, we have not been able to get a more detailed breakdown of marks at subject level.

Measuring the overall performance of individual schools is simpler and better because the DoBE report provides information on the overall performance of pupils at 5 levels (Failed, Passed NSC, Passed with Higher Certificate, Passed with Diploma and Passed with Bachelors). Data analysis at this level makes it possible to get a reasonably accurate idea of how individual schools, districts and even provinces are performing.

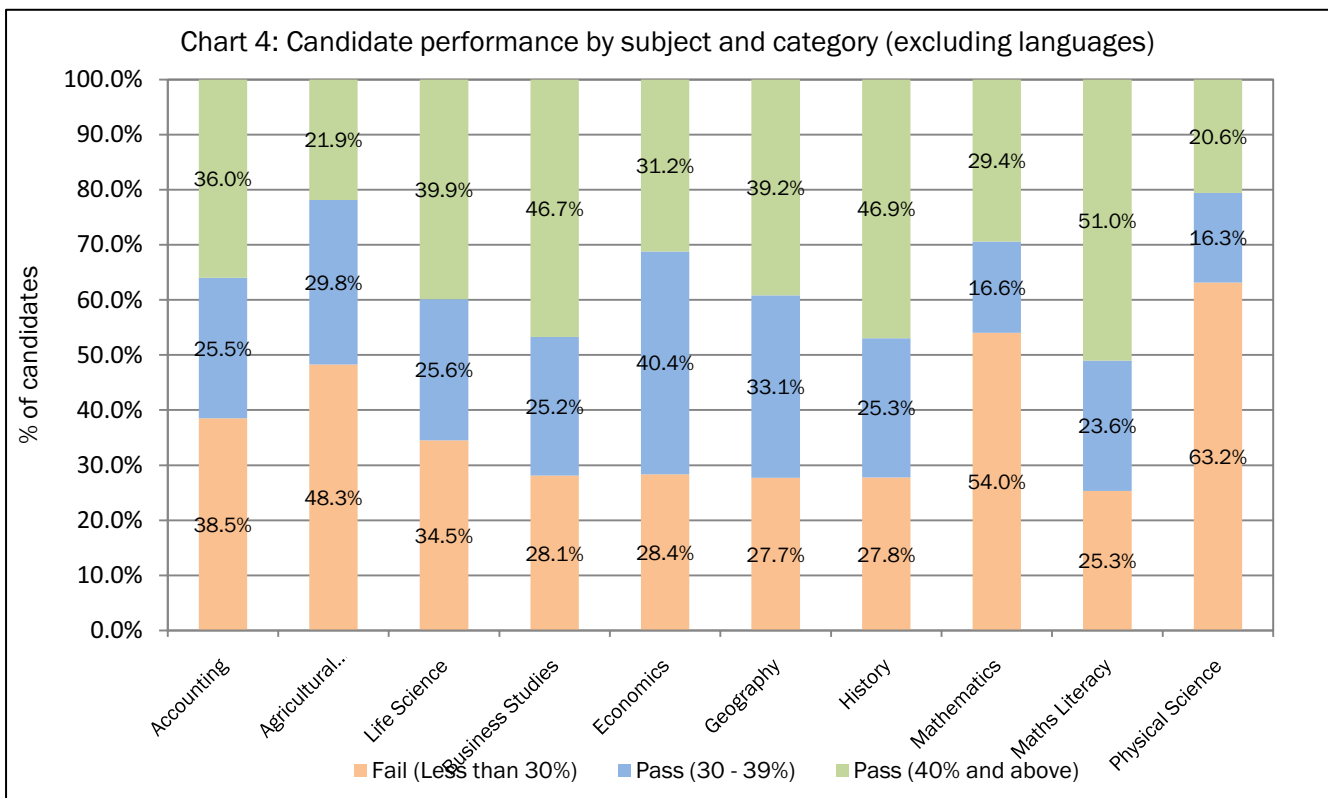


Chart 4: Candidate performance by subject and category (excluding languages)

In this chart we have broken each of the major non-language subjects down into the three categories listed in the DoBE report and show the % of candidates for the subject who fall into each of the categories, fail (below 30%), Pass (30% - 39%), and Pass (more than 40%). We have excluded the languages because their results are so different from the results of these subjects. This is illustrated on the next two charts.

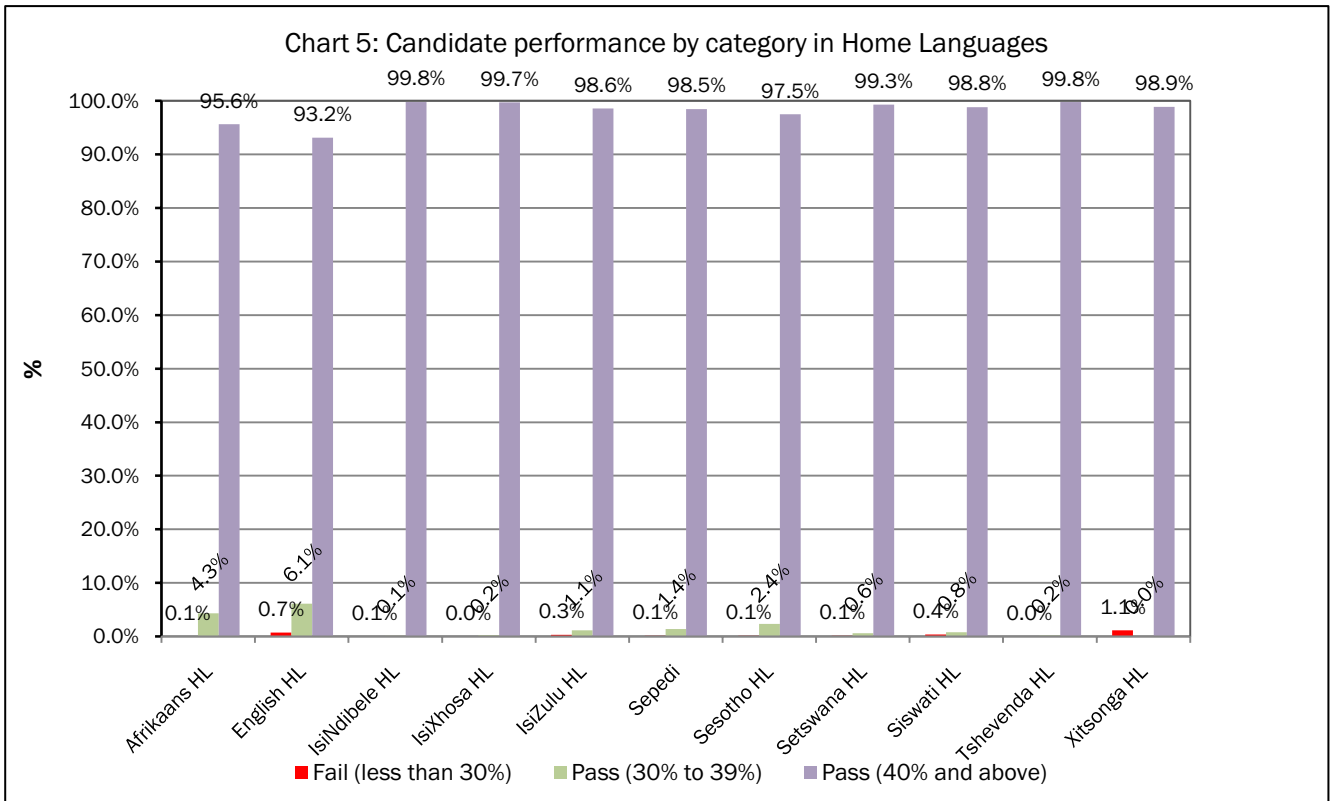


Chart 5: Candidate performance by category in Home Languages

This and the next chart show just how few failures there are in the Home and First Additional Languages and that the majority of candidates pass with a mark of 40% and above. This is very different from the non-language subjects where the best performing subject in terms of the % of candidates passing with a mark of 40% and above is Mathematical Literacy with just 51% of candidates in this category. Compare this with the language with the lowest performance in this category (which is English First Additional Language with 72.4% of candidates passing at this level).

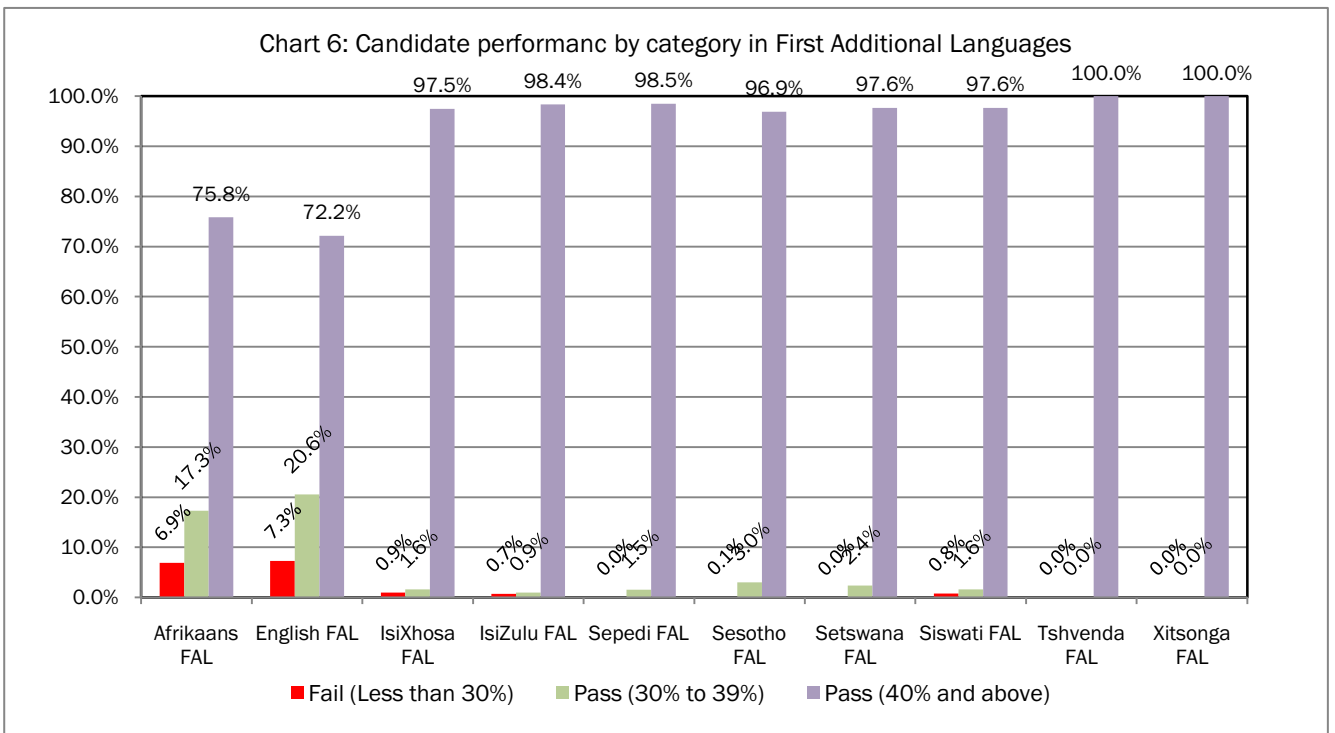


Chart 6: Candidate performance by category in First Additional Language

After Life Orientation (575 039) which is compulsory, the subject with the greatest number of candidates is English First Additional Language which was written by 469 486 candidates - 7.3% of these candidates failed, 20.3% passed with a mark of between 30% and 39% and 72.4% passed with a mark of 40% or more. Because English FAL is written by such a large number of candidates, and because it is in all probability also the Language of Learning and Teaching of these candidates, it makes it a useful comparative benchmark for the non-language subjects.

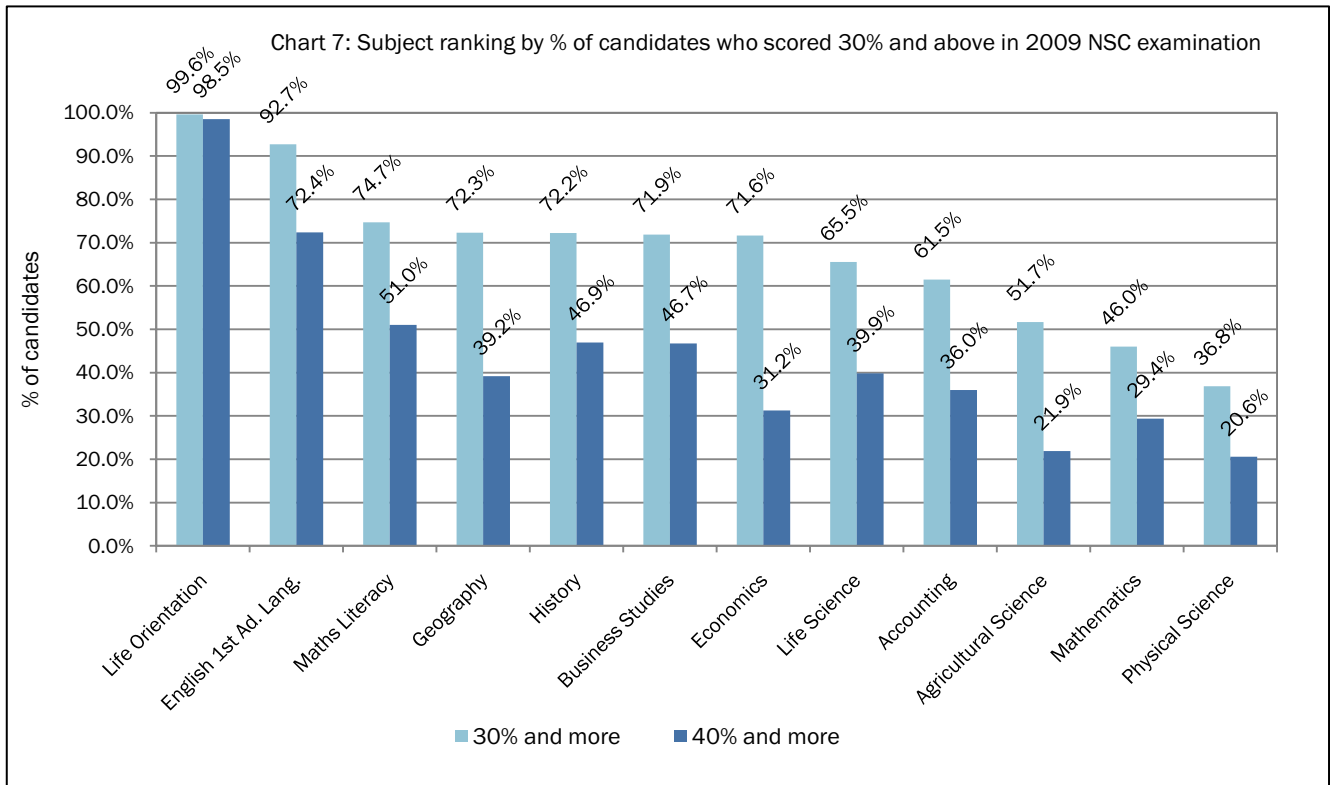


Chart 7: Selected subjects sorted (L to R) by percentage of candidates who passed (30% and above)

We have used this chart to illustrate the very significant difference in the percentage of candidates who pass (30% and above) the main non-language subjects. Life Orientation and English FAL are included for comparative purposes.

The graph also shows the number of candidates who passed with a mark of 40% or more. What is disturbing is that

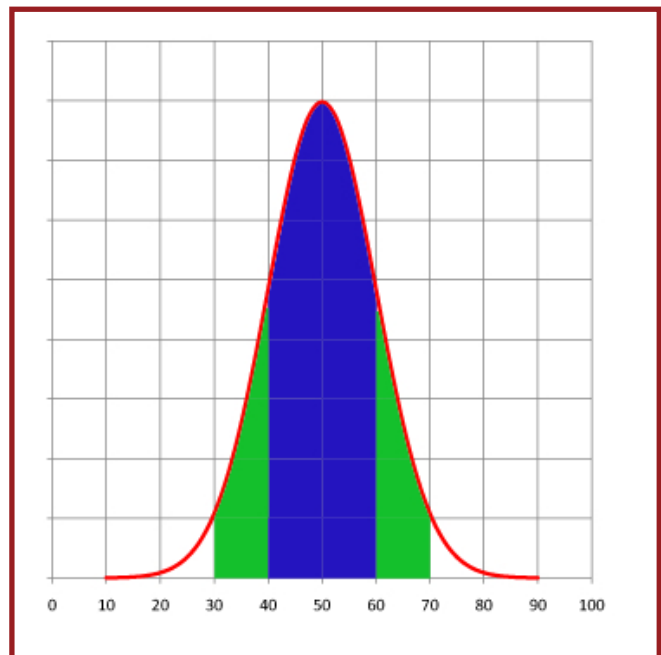
Mathematics and Physical Science, which were both written by large numbers of candidates, have the lowest percentage of passes. With 156 902 failures in Mathematics and 139 526 failures in Physical Science, these two subjects may well have contributed significantly to the overall failure rate in the 2009 NSC examinations. A rough calculation on our part suggests that if all of these failures were to choose other subjects which may be easier to pass and if as a result of this change just 30% of them passed these subjects, this could result in an increase in the overall pass rate nationally, of between 2% and 3%. For more about the Mathematics and Physical Science results turn to the article "Physical Sciences -who dropped the ball?" on page 7.

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Our analysis produced interesting - and in some cases startling - results. Some of our findings are also cause for concern. These include the discrepancies between the results of the languages and Life Orientation, relative to those of the other subjects; the discrepancies between the mark distributions of Physical Science relative to Mathematics; and the seemingly disproportionate number of candidates who, relative to other subjects, take and fail Mathematics and Physical Science.

References

¹ Department of Basic Education, *National Examinations and Assessment: Report on the National Senior Certificate Examination results 2009*. The report can be downloaded from the DoBE website.



A classic bell curve with a mean of 50. If the NSC results were based on a curve like this, 68% of candidates could expect to score between 40 and 60 and 95% to score between 30 and 70

2009 NSC Results

Physical Science - who dropped the ball?

2009 NSC Physical Science results have left many teachers and principals sad, mad and a little confused. We have tried to understand the nature of the problem.

We started hearing rumours about problems with the 2009 NSC Physical Science results soon after schools re-opened for the 2010 academic year; and began investigating the matter as soon as we were able to get hold of a copy of the DoBE's report on the 2009 NSC examinations¹. The data from this report revealed some interesting and rather startling information particularly in relation to the performance of those pupils who would normally expect to do well.

In order to understand the results better we did a thorough analysis of the data available to us, using the results for Mathematics, which one would normally

expect to show a good correlation with the marks from Physical Science, as a yardstick.

Unfortunately, as we have mentioned elsewhere in this edition, the DoBE subject statistics group results into just three levels of performance: Fail (below 30%), Pass (between 30% and 39%), and Pass (between 40% and 100%). Fortunately, however, we were able to source additional data from an article published in the online news service Politicsweb² which provided data showing the results for Mathematics and Physical Science distributed into the 7 formally designated Achievement Levels (ALs). Some of the charts we have used to illustrate

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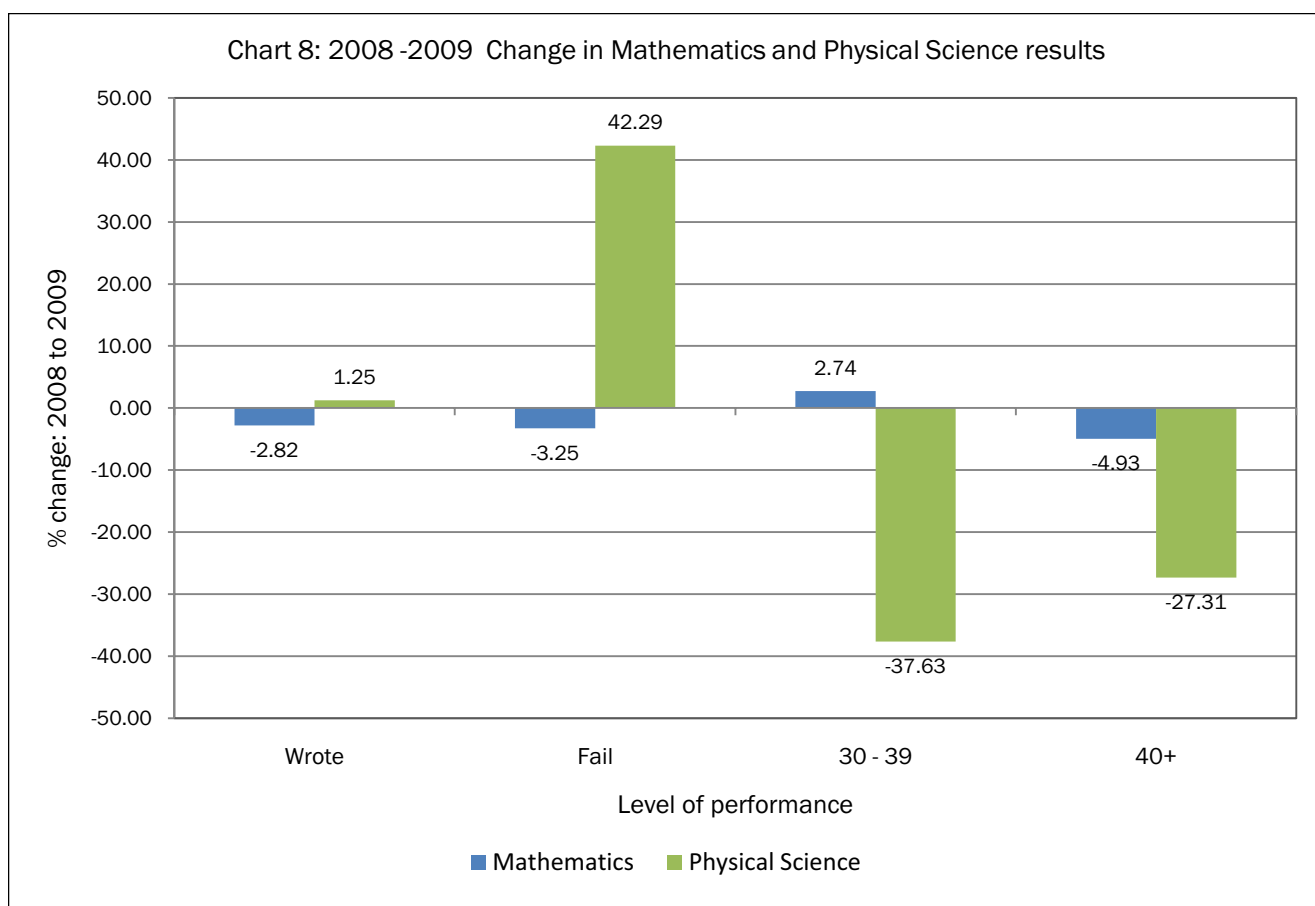


Chart 8: 2008 to 2009: % change in the Mathematics and Physical Science results

This graph illustrates quite clearly just how dramatically the Physical Science results have changed from 2008. It is useful to contrast this with the relative stability of the Mathematics results in each of the three performance categories. These changes cannot be attributed to changes in the number of candidates who wrote each subject as the data shows that these changes were minor. A 42.29% increase in the failure rate, coupled with a 37.63% decline in the number of passes in the 30% - 39% band and a 27.31% decline in the number of passes in the 40% and above band, is inexcusable in a national examination of this importance.

the nature and extent of the problems are based on this information which was acknowledged as having come from the DoBE. In an effort to get an even more detailed understanding of the impact of the results on individual schools, we invited more than 30 of our subscribing high schools to send us a breakdown of their Mathematics and Physical Science results for 2009. Their response was excellent, with virtually every school providing the information we had asked for. Two of the charts are derived from the data that they provided. We are grateful to them for their support.

What the data tells us

The charts show quite clearly that there was a real problem with the 2009 Physical Science results.

With a pass rate of just 36.8%, this subject has the lowest pass rate of any of the subjects on the approved subject lists. It also had the lowest percentage of candidates (20.6%) who scored at 40% and above. Compare this with Mathematics in which 46.0% of candidates passed and 29.4% passed with a mark of

40% and above. In absolute terms Mathematics and Physical Science were the two subjects with the highest number of failures - 156 902 failures in the case of Mathematics and 139 526 failures in the case of Physical Science. If schools and the DoBE do nothing else in 2010, they need to address this problem as a matter of urgency. Encouraging pupils to choose Mathematics and Physical Science at the start of Grade 10 makes absolutely no sense if these pupils have not yet acquired the basic numeracy skills they need to succeed in these subjects and to pass them at the end of their Grade 12 year. In this regard, although we do not have access to the data needed to prove our conjecture, we think it highly likely that a significant proportion of those who failed the NSC in 2009 failed as a result of their failure in these two subjects.

What is equally concerning is the very significant change in the Physical Science results from 2008 to 2009. This is clearly illustrated by Chart 8 on page 6. We have included the same information for Mathematics to illustrate the difference in the consistency of

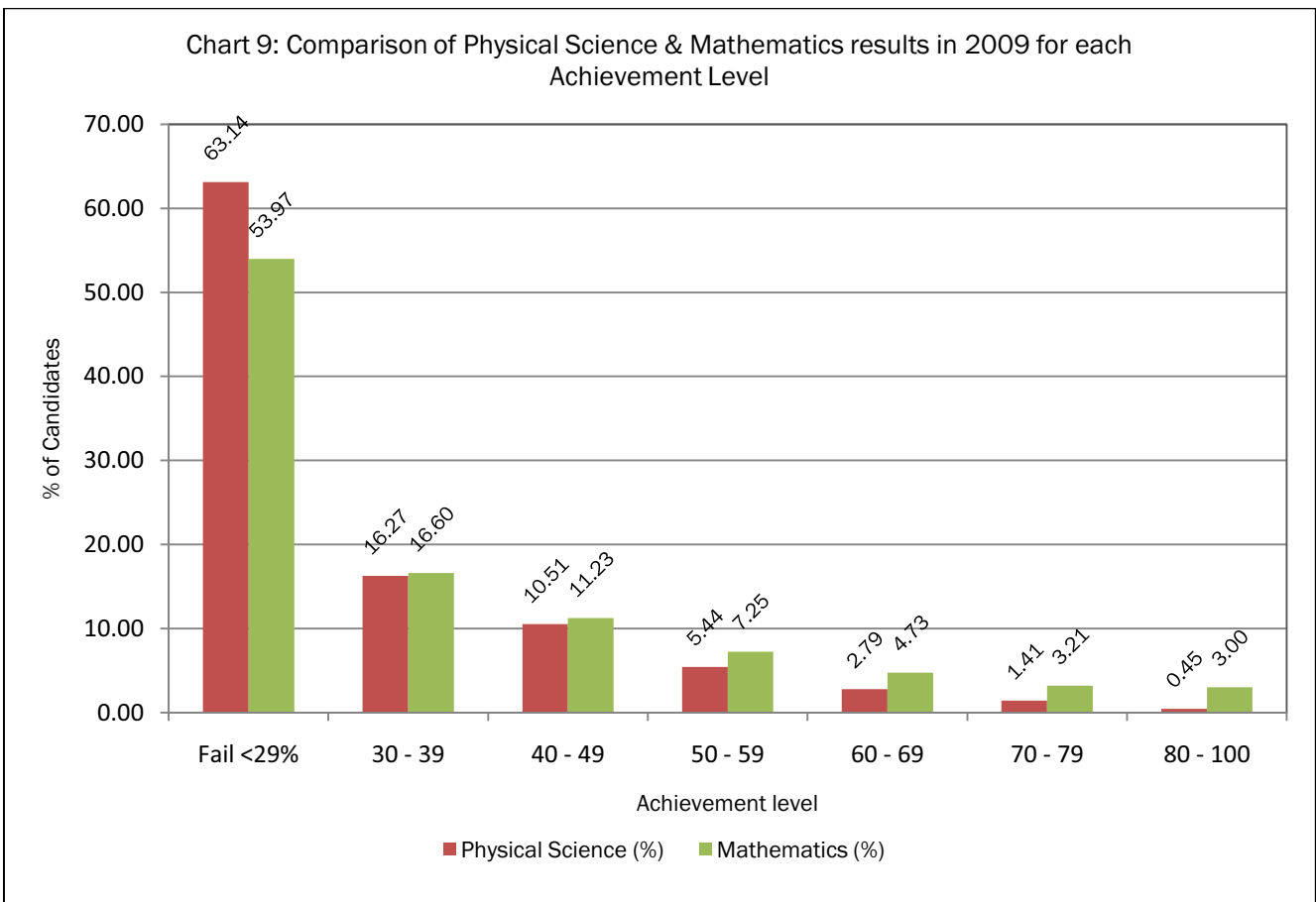


Chart 9: Comparison of results of Physical Science and Mathematics for each Achievement Level.

The chart shows the % of candidates in each subject who achieved at each of the 7 Achievement levels. From the chart it can be seen that the percentage of candidates who achieve at the 30 – 39% achievement level is very similar for the two subjects but becomes increasingly different as you move to the higher achievement levels. Just 0.4% (987 candidates) of Physical Science candidates performed at this level compared to the 3.0% (8 710) of Mathematics candidates who performed at this level.



the results of the two subjects from 2008 to 2009. While the Mathematics results are relatively stable from one year to the next, the Physical Science results show a huge variance. As the chart shows, the number of candidates who wrote the examination was very similar in 2008 and 2009. There were just 2.82% fewer candidates who wrote Mathematics and 1.25% more candidates who wrote Physical Science. However, if you look at the percentage change in the number of candidates who failed each of the subjects, the picture is very different. There were 3.35% fewer failures in Mathematics in 2008 than 2009 but a massive 42.29% more failures in Physical Science. Similarly, the percentage of those who passed Physical Science in the 30% to 39% band is 37.63% fewer in 2009 than 2008 (41 466 candidates!) and 27.31% fewer in the 40% and above band. The equivalent figures for Mathematics are 2.74% and 4.93% respectively. It is not surprising therefore that many Science teachers and their principals are up in arms.

Further analysis, using the information provided by the Politicsweb³ article, which grouped the Mathematics and Physical Science results into the 7 achievement levels, was used to produce the Chart 9 on page 8. This chart shows the % of candidates in each of Mathematics and Physical Science, who achieved at each of the 7 Achievement levels. The chart shows clearly that the percentage of candidates who achieve at the 30 – 39% achievement level is very similar for the two subjects but that as you move to the higher achievement levels, the % of Physical Science candidates falling into each category becomes progressively less than the percentage for Mathematics. At the extreme, just 0.4% (or 987) candidates scored 80% or more in Physical Science compared to the 3% (or 8 710) of candidates who scored more than 80% in Mathematics. These figures help explain why schools that consistently produce candidates who score at 80% and above were particularly unhappy with their 2009 Physical Science results.

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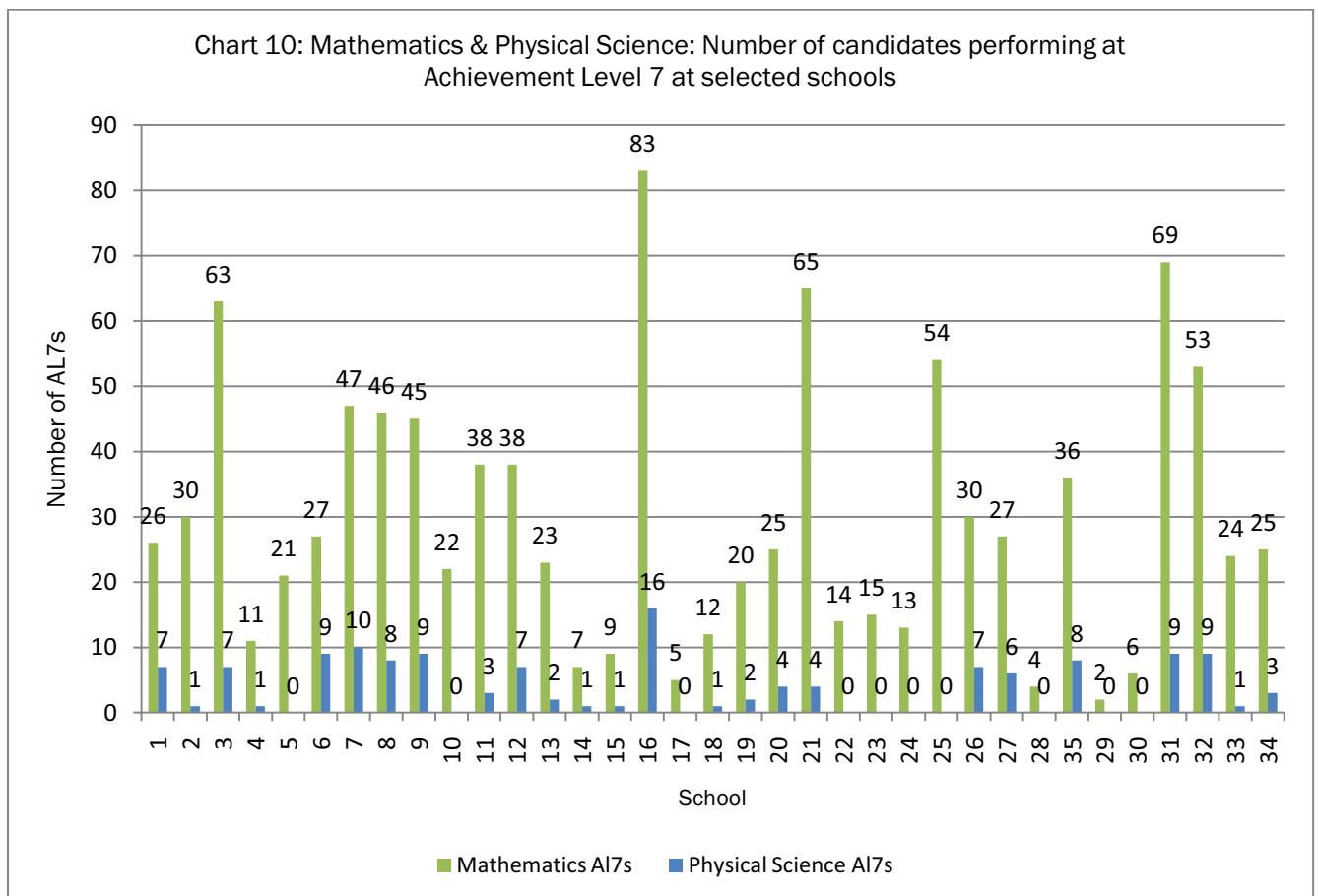


Chart 10: Physical Science and Mathematics results of selected schools at Achievement Level 7
 This chart shows the difference in the number of candidates who scored at Achievement Level 7 (80% and above) at 34 selected schools from across the country. The results illustrate clearly the significant difference in the performance of candidates from these schools in the two subjects. Many schools principals complained of having to mollify candidates who had expected to perform at this level in Physical Science but failed to do so and how this had jeopardised the admission chances of these candidates to their first choice degree courses.

The 34 schools that responded to our survey produced a total of 1 035 candidates with a score of 80% or more in Mathematics, but just 136 candidates from these same schools scored 80% or above for Physical Science. This represents a ratio of 7.6 : 1 or, put more simply, there were 7.6 candidates who scored over 80% in Mathematics for every 1 who did so in Physical Science. These differences are well illustrated in Chart 10 on page 9. The difference in the Mathematics and Physical Science averages for the 34 schools was 11.4%. These results, however, are spectacular when compared to the results of the rest of the country. The schools represent just 0.54% of the number of schools in the country that entered candidates in the NSC examinations but their candidates represent 11.88% of all candidates who scored over 80% in Mathematics and 13.78% of those who scored over 80% in Physical Science.

What we have done

Most of the above information has been provided to the MEC for Education in the Western Cape, who promised to take up the matter, as well as with the Chairperson of Umalusi, Prof. Volmink, who has promised to respond to these concerns and to provide **SM&L** with an article or material for an article, on how Umalusi goes about the process of standardising the NSC results. The purpose of this process, according to the DoBE Report⁴ on the 2009 examinations, is to ensure there is an “equivalence” of standards from year to year. This is largely a statistical process although apparently over recent years more qualitative data has been considered in an effort to “authenticate” the data. Umalusi is expected to establish a norm for each subject based on the results of the previous 5 years. There is clearly a problem with the process at present, which can perhaps be partially explained by the fact that this is only the second year of the NCS based NSC examinations.

We also understand that a number of schools in the Western Cape were invited to a meeting about the Physical Science results chaired by DDG(Curriculum Management) Mr Brian Schreuder. Those present were able to raise their concerns and we understand that certain undertakings were made. There is more about this meeting in the box elsewhere on page. We are also been contacted by a source in Gauteng who indicated to us that a letter setting out the concerns of schools about the Physical Science results has been submitted to the Gauteng DoBE.

If there are any further developments in this matter we will carry them in the next editions of **SM&L**. We also invite you, our readers, to contact us with any concerns or information that you may have about this matter. ■

WCED meets principals and Physical Sciences teachers

The WCED invited principals and Physical Sciences subject heads to a meeting to discuss their concerns about the 2009 NSC Physical Science results. The meeting was chaired by DDG (Curriculum Management) Mr Brian Schreuder, a former Physical Science teacher and examiner.

The information below is based on reports on the meeting which were sent to us by some of our readers. We are grateful to them for their support in this matter.

We have focused particularly on comments made by examiners who were involved in the marking of the 2009 Physical Science scripts. According to the reports that we have received the following matters were perceived by them as contributing factors to the poor performance of candidates.

- Insufficient preparation resulting in candidates who are unable to:
 - Correctly articulate basic definitions, laws or scientific terms
 - Make correct use of scientific terms
 - Answer lower-order questions correctly. These are questions that weaker candidates would normally be expected to answer correctly.
- Conceptual questions in Paper 2 were answered poorly
- The treatment of the memorandum was inflexible with no allowance made for alternative appropriate correct answers
- There was an imbalance in the manner in which marks were allocated in the memorandum with minor errors attracting disproportionately severe penalties. This meant that there was little differentiation between poor and better candidates.
- Differences in the way in which the examination guidelines can be interpreted created confusion in the minds of teachers and pupils.

We hope to bring you more information about what appears to be an ongoing battle about the Physical Science results in the next edition of **SM&L**.

References

¹Department of Basic Education, National Examinations and Assessment: Report on the National Senior Certificate Examination results 2009.

²The Govt Matrix: Number crunched, Politicsweb, 21 January 2010 (go to <http://www.politicsweb.co.za/>)

³Ibid

⁴Ibid

Recommendations of the NCS Task Team now policy

Notice No. 1227 in the Government Gazette of 29 December 2009 gives legislative authority to some of the recommendations of the Task Team Appointed to Review the Implementation of the National Curriculum Statement.

Government Notice No. 1227 in *Government Gazette No. 32836* of 29 December 2009 gives legislative authority to some of the recommendations of the Task Team Appointed to Review the Implementation of the National Curriculum Statement. These recommendations are now considered to be official policy in terms of Sections 3(4) (l) of the *National Education Policy Act, 1996*.

Approved with immediate effect for implementation in 2010

1 Discontinuation of Learner Portfolio Files

While the enactment of this recommendation means that the use of these files as compilations of work is no longer a requirement, schools are still required to ensure that they are in a position to submit evidence of a pupil's work, as well as a record of school-based assessment for purposes of promotion and progression.

2 Requirements for a single teacher file for planning the number of Learning Areas in the Intermediate Phase should be reduced.

This statement is not very specific about the changes that will be required but the explanation linked to the policy amendment indicates that the DoBE has developed a guideline document for a single teacher file, which lists the core requirements for the Teacher File. It also makes it clear that teachers and "other education officials" will be required to adhere to these requirements.

Schools need to ensure that they get hold of a copy of this guideline document as soon as it becomes available. This will be the official policy document and schools will need to make sure that the Teacher Files kept by their teachers meet the minimum requirements as set out in this policy document. It is also important to note that in terms of the recommendations, no other curriculum policy guidelines may be issued to schools unless these have been submitted to, and approved by, the Council of Education Ministers. In terms of these regulations, therefore, curriculum/subject advisors may not modify, amend or add their own additional requirements to those listed in the guidelines document.

3 Reduction in the number of projects required by learners

In terms of this policy directive, the number of projects as part of School-Based Assessment is now limited to one per subject. The DoBE has apparently developed draft samples of suitable projects which it plans to distribute to schools. It is important to note that these are "draft samples" and schools cannot therefore be forced to use these specific projects for their school-based assessment, although they may use them if they choose to do so.

4 Discontinuation of the Common Tasks for Assessment (CTAs)

The CTAs are to be discontinued "with immediate effect" which means from the day that this particular Gazette was published (29 December 2009). The CTAs are to be replaced by an annual national assessment from 2010.

Recommendations for implementation from 2011

In addition to the above this Notice, commits the DoBE to the implementation of the following recommendations from 2011:

1 A reduction in the number of learning areas in the Intermediate Phase.

2 Prioritising the teaching of English First Additional Language (FAL) and its introduction into the curriculum from Grade 1.

3 Regular external systemic assessments of Mathematics, Home Language and English (FAL) in Grades 3, 6, and 9.

For Grades 3 and 6 this is likely to mean an expansion of the current model of systemic assessment. In Grade 9 it is likely to take the form of an externally set examination of these subjects – the so-called "annual national assessment" – which is set to replace the CTAs this year.

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4. The development of National Curriculum and Assessment Policy documents per learning area and subject.

The intention is that these policy documents will be prepared in the correct policy format, for each learning area in the GET phase and for each subject in the FET phase, for implementation in January 2011. These documents will therefore need to reach schools by the end of September if the DoBE is to adhere to task team recommendations that it has adopted. The relevant recommendation reads as follows: "...circulars related to any recommended changes to the national curriculum, its implementation or assessment should be made only once a year. No changes may be made after September for the following year. All changes need to be passed through the CMC and HEDCOM, and issued through a DG circular".

Before the remaining recommendations which are not included in the above can be implemented, a number of policy and regulation changes will need to be made. In terms of the *National Education Policy Act*, and the *South African Schools Act*, there are certain legislative procedures that need to be followed in the processing of these proposed policy and regulation changes. The dates of the implementation of these longer-term recommendations can therefore only be announced once these processes have been completed. ■

References

¹ *National Education Policy Act, 1996* (Act No. 27 of 1996)

² *Report of the Task Team for the Review of the Implementation of the National Curriculum Statement, Final Report* (DoBE, Pretoria, October 2009)

News

January meeting of the Council of Education Ministers (CEM)

The first meeting of the year of the Council of Education Ministers took place on 28 January. The media statement released after the meeting suggests that a large part of the meeting was devoted to the 2009 NSC examinations and to dealing with serial underperforming schools.

The following matters which we consider may be of interest to our readers were covered in the media statement:

- The need to do far more to improve the performance of candidates in Mathematics, Physical Science and Accounting in the NSC examinations. This would best be achieved, according to the statement, by improving the methodology and content knowledge of the teachers who teach these subjects.
- The need to strengthen the direct support for schools and teachers through provincial structures. These provincial structures are expected to take a more active role in the improving poor teaching, in strengthening the management of schools, and in building a commitment to professionalism. There was also a need to make the system as a whole more efficient.

- The implementation of a "Rapid Assessment and Remediation Initiative", as a short-term measure, to address underperformance in high schools that attained a pass rate of less than 20% in the 2009 NSC examinations. There were no specifics about what this would involve other than that the intention is to have in place a "quick response mechanism to address specific challenges in underperforming schools". We wonder if these measures include mechanisms to replace the principals of these schools, something that the DoBE has been threatening to do for some time.

- A commitment to finalising the "Basic Education Action Plan" by March 2010. The purpose of this plan is to address the "shortcomings of the system". It aims to achieve this by improving inter-governmental relations in education by clarifying lines of accountability. Provinces and provincial education departments will also be expected to meet "clear, agreed outcomes" and to ensure that "all in the system are accountable for these outcomes".

Not too much is new here. The question, as always, will be whether the DoBE and PDoBEs can turn their words into the kinds of action that will produce the results that they hope for. ■

Comment

Do the districts know that things have changed?

It would appear from what we are being told that some education districts do not yet understand the implications of the Minister's acceptance of the recommendations of the Task Team on the implementation of the NCS.

This article was prompted by two events; the release of the *Report by the Ministerial Task Team on the Implementation of the National Curriculum Statement*, and a number of complaints from principals of schools which fall under the Umlazi District in KZN, about workshops which their teachers have been called to attend during school hours.

The Umlazi District Circular ("No. 01. of 2010") indicates that the subject of the workshops will be "Grade 10 – 12 Orientation and Content Workshops 2010" and that "Teachers will be updated on matters from the examiners' reports, the scope of work for the common testing programme, (where applicable), the SBA/CASS requirements and revision strategies, amongst other issues. Teachers will also have the opportunity of indicating their needs so that advisors could arrange on-going support. Arrangements will be made for the moderation and verification of SBA/CASS marks at the beginning of 2010."

The circular goes on to stress that "teachers should ensure that arrangements are made for their teaching obligations to be fulfilled before attending the workshops" but in the next point indicates that the workshops are scheduled to start at 08:00. The dates and times of the workshops are then listed for each of the 4 Umlazi sub-districts (Durban Central, Chatsworth, Phumelela, and Umbumbulu). Nearly 50 workshops are scheduled for each of the sub-districts, with attendance expected from at least one teacher teaching the relevant subject from Grade 10 or 11 in 2010 and one teacher teaching the relevant subject from Grade 12 in 2010. The workshops take place throughout January and February.

While we are sure that those responsible for organising these workshops have arranged them in the belief that they will be helpful to teachers, they clearly do not appreciate the impact that these workshops will have on the effective functioning of schools or the extent to which they will erode valuable teaching time. Regrettably they also appear to be unaware of the injunctions of the Minister with regard to workshops during teaching time and of the findings and recommendations of the Ministerial Committee which reviewed the implementation of the NCS. The report of

the Ministerial Committee was quite emphatic in its view that Subject Advisors and the way in which they went about their work, particularly as it related to workshops, had contributed significantly to the confusion and administrative load experienced by teachers in the implementation of the NCS. This is clearly illustrated by the following extracts taken from the report.

- "The problem of provincial and district layering often appears to be exacerbated when schools are identified as being 'at risk' in terms of low student achievement. External examinations are supplied to schools, as are special work schedules and lesson plans, or rubrics for moderation of work. Rather than assisting these schools, the quality of the material provided is often questionable, and the additional documentation often causes further administrative work – both in deciphering new requirements and adhering to new recording and reporting processes."
- "In the hearings teachers reported being 'held hostage' by officials in terms of covering assessment standard requirements. In the submissions as well, a 'bureaucratic mindset' was reported to dominate district level offices, where the focus was on fulfilling bureaucratic requirements."

The committee's proposals for improving the situation include the following recommendations:

- "Subject advisors' roles as school-based subject experts must be affirmed. A job description and performance plan for subject advisors that focus on their work on the delivery, implementation and moderation of the curriculum, and offering subject specific support to teachers must be tabled."
- "Cluster meetings for moderation purposes should be limited to an annual meeting for teachers, focussed on sharing information and considering other schools' examination papers and marking memoranda."

In Chapter 6 of the report which has as its heading "Support for Curriculum Implementation: Training", there is an explanation of what is meant by "school-

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based” support for teachers. The report suggests that much of the training up to now has been “superficial” and “too generic” and also “decontextualised” and “unsupported”: a view that we share. The report goes on to recommend that all training be contextualised in terms of actual needs, and then followed up through “classroom-based monitoring, mentoring and support”. This and other comments in the report make it quite clear that subject advisors need to get out of their offices and into their schools. They need to observe teachers in action in order to understand the specific challenges that they face because it is only by observing the teacher in action that they can provide guidance and support that are tailored to the needs of individual teachers. The report acknowledges that this is a significant shift from what is happening at present. It also notes that while this approach implies that “training does happen outside of school hours, the pre- and post- training activities of Subject Advisors should be done during school hours.” The pre- and post-training activities that they are referring to are those related to classroom observation, which is why they must happen during school hours.

The report emphasises the importance of reducing the number and frequency with which curriculum-related circulars and other documents are issued by the DoE, PEDs and district offices. Its recommendation for dealing with this plethora of material reads as follows: “As of September 2009, circulars related to any recommended changes to the national curriculum, its implementation or assessment should be made only once a year. No changes should be made after September of the following year. All changes need to be passed through the CMC and HEDCOM, and issued through a DG circular.”

The status of this recommendation was confirmed by Minister Motshekga in a press release on 29 October following her acceptance of the final report. The release



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UMLAZI DISTRICT CIRCULAR NO. 01 OF 2010

TO: Cluster Managers
Ward Managers
Principals of Secondary Schools
Grade 10 – 12 Teachers

GRADE 10 – 12 ORIENTATION and CONTENT WORKSHOPS for 2010

The above-mentioned workshops will take place according to the details in the attached schedule.

Teachers will be updated on matters from the examiners’ reports, the scope of work for the common testing programme, (where applicable), the SBA/CASS requirements and revision strategies, amongst other issues. Teachers will also have the opportunity of indicating their needs so that advisors could arrange on-going support. Arrangements will be made for the moderation and verification of SBA/CASS marks at the beginning of 2010. Details for the workshops are as follows:

1. VENUES, DATES AND TIMES
 - The various venues, dates and times for the workshops are indicated on the attached schedules.
 - Teachers should ensure that arrangements have been made for their teaching obligations to be fulfilled **before** attending the workshops.
 - Orientation/content workshops are scheduled to start at 08:00, **unless otherwise specified on the attached schedule.**
2. ATTENDANCE
 - At least one teacher teaching the relevant subject in Gr 10 or Gr 11 during 2010.
 - One teacher teaching the relevant subject in Gr 12 during 2010.

Consult the relevant subject advisors for any further information.

Please bring the contents of this circular to the attention of the **relevant teachers and School Management Team.**

included the following statement: “There is a moratorium on the development and distribution of new curriculum documents until the publication of the Curriculum and Assessment Policy documents by the Department.”

The Minister made additional comments in this regard when she briefed Parliament on the report of the Ministerial Committee. Her statement to Parliament included the following: “Targeted in-service training that will be subject specific and targeted only where needed will be provided for teachers from 2010. This in-service training will, however, not under any circumstance be allowed to disrupt teaching and learning.”

“There is a moratorium on the development and distribution of new curriculum documents until the publication of the Curriculum and Assessment Policy documents by the Department”
Minister Motshekga (29 October 2009)

Given all of the above, one has to wonder about the thinking behind the decision of the Umlazi district to go ahead with a programme which is clearly at odds with current DoBE policy. ■

The NSC exams: Why no averages or symbol distributions?

The DoBE's report on the 2009 National Senior Certificate examinations contains a massive amount of data, most of it irrelevant to schools because it does not provide the kind of detail they need to understand how their own results relate to the district, provincial, and national norms. This is a time when schools need reliable, comparable statistics to benchmark their own performance standards at a whole-school level and also at a subject level. For high schools, the most obvious source of this information is the NSC examination. Comparative data is particularly important now because a school's own historical data for the period prior to the first writing of the NSC examinations in 2008 may no longer be a valid benchmark for the school's performance in examinations based on the new NCS.

As things stand at present, schools are given the results of their own candidates and also, for each subject, a detailed breakdown of the performance of the pupils as a group for each question in that subject, in relation to the province. This kind of information is very useful to individual teachers and subject heads as it makes it possible for them to identify the sections of the work which pupils are finding difficult and/or which pupils have misunderstood. They can then take steps to remedy the situation by reviewing their teaching strategies and by providing pupils with extra support in the form of additional instruction and more thorough assessment in the areas in which they performed poorly.

What the DoBE and PEDs have not provided for schools is the kind of data that makes it possible for the principal to evaluate the performance of the school in terms of its past performance and its performance relative to other schools in the district, the province

and nationally. The kind of information that we are referring to and which was provided to schools in the past (prior to the introduction of the NSC) includes the following.

- National, provincial and district subject averages
- The symbol (level of achievement) distribution at national, provincial and district level for each of the subjects for which the school entered candidates.

Both of the above sets of information are important management tools for principals and we have been contacted by a number of principals about the non-availability of this data and with a request that we forward the information to them if we are able to source it.

We believe that the DoE and PEDs should go further than this and that they should use the data that has been captured into the system to provide schools with performance data that is relevant and

helpful to them in their efforts to improve. This should include data about the performance of a basket of comparable schools as well as data about the results of the top performing schools that can be used as a measure of excellence by those schools that aspire to be amongst the best.

Examples of the kinds of data that could prove valuable to specific categories of schools include:

- The subject averages and symbol distributions for each subject of the schools in the district by quintile. This would make it possible for a school in Quintile 1 to compare its results to the results of other Quintile 1 schools in the district.

Our battle to get information from the WCED and DoBE

Over the past month we approached the WCED and the DoBE on several occasions both formally and informally in an effort to obtain the 2009 NSC subject averages and symbol distributions. We made the approach because we consider this data to be an important management tool for principals and subject heads. Disappointingly, although promises have been made, the information has not been forthcoming. It has now reached the stage where we are beginning to wonder whether the powers that be have something to hide and that this is a deliberate effort to avoid exposing this data to public scrutiny. We hope that this is not the case and that the reason relates more to incompetence than to disingenuousness.

We will continue in our efforts to get hold of this information and will publish the data if we are successful.

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status following the publication of a notice to this effect in the *Government Gazette* on 29 December. What is of concern to us is that some districts and provinces appear to be either ignorant of these recommendations or to be simply disregarding them. On page 13 we report on workshops that are being run during school hours in the Umlazi district of KZN in complete disregard of the statement made by Minister Motshekga to Parliament that in-service training would not be allowed to disrupt teaching and learning. We were alerted to these workshops by some of our readers who are principals of schools which fall within the Umlazi district. This is not the only complaint that we have heard in this regard. It appears that the Mpumalanga DoBE is running workshops and distributing learning area and subject guidelines to schools which were developed prior to the NCS review. Rumour has it that these documents were prepared for release at the start of 2009 but could not be printed because of a lack of funds. Distributing them now goes completely against one of the policy decisions agreed to by the DoBE and PEDs when they approved the recommendations of the Ministerial Task Team. In the media statement following the Council of Education Minister's meeting at which the recommendations were formally approved, it was made clear that there was a moratorium on the distribution of curriculum documents developed at provincial and district level. Are we simply putting new wine into old wineskins or are these just the teething problems of a fresh start? Only time will tell. ■

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- Disaggregating the data further to provide subject averages and symbol distributions for rural, township and urban schools. This would also make it easier for schools to measure their performance against norms which are appropriate for the socio-economic circumstances in which they find themselves.

The purpose of the above suggestions is not to encourage schools to become more competitive, although a little competition never did anyone any harm, but rather to provide them with a means of measuring their progress from year to year. There is a truism in business which goes as follows: "If it can't be measured it doesn't count". If our schooling system is going to begin to improve we need to start measuring the things that matter and to begin holding those in authority accountable for the performance of their schools using these measures. This can happen only if the data used to measure performance provides a fair assessment of performance in relation to the resources available to the school and the environmental and socio-economic context in which it operates. Providing schools with the kind of information that we are suggesting is one way of ensuring that they have the means to start evaluating their own performance relative to their peers who operate in similar circumstances. ■

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