

# SA needs to do the maths on World Cup tradeoffs

THE transformation of education in post-apartheid SA has accompanied a heightened responsiveness to the country's need for pro-poor priorities. There is a tightly woven connection between education and socioeconomic development. Accordingly, the World Cup – a key development impetus – emerges, particularly at the school level, as a site of multiple potential tradeoffs: acting as both a catalyst for accelerated change and an inhibitor of learner growth.

In October last year, Minister of Education Naledi Pandor said that by 2010 the education department aimed to achieve universal enrolment in Grade R. Certainly, it seems that there is international support available in this regard. In late March, French President Nicolas Sarkozy and British Prime Minister Gordon Brown, supported by Fifa, launched a project aimed at ensuring that an additional 16-million African children will be accommodated in the African school system by the start of the football mega-event. Assistance will also be forthcoming in terms of teacher training and recruitment. Legacies, of course, extend beyond the material implications of 2010 and strategies which broaden educational access and participation – not just in SA but in continental Africa as a whole – are crucial. It seems an anathema that such an initiative – widely reported on in the international media – received such scant attention at home.

Instead, we have heard considerably more about the South African Schools Football World Cup Partnership – an initiative of the education and sports and recreation departments, as well as the SABC and 2010 Local Organising Committee – which aims, according to Pandor, to "encourage mass youth participation in football and help nurture our young boys and girls". The project includes 2010-related curricula, learning outputs, art competitions and football tournaments. This project is sure to generate excitement and stimulate a broader interest among learners about



the world around them and simultaneously to encourage sports development.

The Human Sciences Research Council's annual 2010 survey, conducted among South Africans from the age of 16, indicates that sports development is not highly anticipated as a main benefit of hosting the World Cup at the national (3%), city (7%), neighbourhood (7%) or personal (3%) scale. Stimulating participation and sports development at the school level is thus an important outcome and here perhaps is an expectation that is achievable and indeed one that can be exceeded. While not negating such benefits, perhaps more emphasis should be devoted to leveraging 2010 as a fulcrum to improve educational prospects and thus development needs. Enabling an active youth is not an unwanted, or unnecessary, outcome; however, in the context of SA's struggling education system one expects greater attention – at the school level – to be focused on widening access, academic quality and acquisition of skills.

In this light, the education department's proposal to increase the midyear holiday in 2010 to five weeks is surely misplaced. The apparent reasoning is to alleviate traffic congestion and avoid absenteeism during the event itself. Yet, last year the matric pass rate, continuing on a downward trend, was 65.2%. In addition, it is particularly discouraging to note that science pass numbers (higher-grade) decreased. This is of utmost concern given the



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reported skills shortage in the science and technology fields.

Indeed, as the Centre for Development and Enterprise accurately pointed out in a recent report, such a situation, together with higher-grade maths pass rates, inhibits economic growth. In this context, learners should be spending more time in class. The solution to traffic congestion entails improved public transportation and infrastructure provision, not de facto mass absenteeism.

The argument that the school year as a whole will have the requisite number of days is irrelevant – decisions regarding education should be motivated by educational outcomes and not traffic! Last year's strike illustrated the pitfalls of disruptions to the school calendar and it is likely that this – in part – contributed to the poor pass rate.

Accordingly, focus should be unwavering on the potential of 2010 to transform the educational system and assist in meeting development, growth and poverty alleviation imperatives. It will undoubtedly be an exciting time to be a learner during the World Cup but as a nation we should be thinking carefully about what lessons will be imparted. Will it be a superficial education or one that is transformative on individual and national levels? Of course, it could potentially be both but in weighing up these tradeoffs, it is important that in all ways possible, 2010 is mobilised to place the educational priorities of our youth centre-field.

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