

Thousands of unplaced high school learners in the Western Cape

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Province's learners struggle for a school place, but KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng claim to be okay,



Parents, unhappy with where their children had been assigned a school placement, gathered at Mamelongu Secondary School in Ekurhuleni, Gauteng, on Thursday as they had heard provincial education department officials were to visit the school. However, department officials did not arrive. Photo: Kimberly Mutandiro

- The Western Cape is struggling to find school places for all Grade 8 applicants, stating there is an influx of learners from other provinces.
- Gauteng claims all learners have been placed, but there have been some protests over the suitability of some of the placements.
- In KwaZulu-Natal, the education department claims 500 learners remain to be placed, and some schools we contacted say they still have space for new Grade 8s.

As the school year started this week, thousands of learners in the Western Cape had not yet been admitted to schools.

The problem impacts high school learners in particular. Western Cape education minister David Maynier said 576 Grade 1 learners still awaited placement, but 2,060 Grade 8 learners were not yet able to start at high school, and the number is expected to increase as late applications are submitted. Obtaining a place in high school has [historically been a problem](#) in the Western Cape.

In the two most populous provinces, the KwaZulu-Natal education department claimed only 500 learners had not been placed, while the Gauteng education department claimed all learners in the province had been assigned a place at school. However, there have been protests in Gauteng over the suitability of these placements.

Western Cape

Historically, Grade 8 placements have been in higher demand than Grade 1 placements. Maynier said as of 11 January the province received more than 97,000 applications for Grade 8, with more applications arriving each day. He said although the department was waiting for precise figures on where new learners are from, “a significant proportion of extremely late applications are from other provinces”.

Maynier said over the past five years, the number of overall learners in Western Cape schools has increased by an average of 19,000 each year. He said they would need to build 19 schools a year to match this demand.

The Western Cape government passed an education budget in March 2023 that saw a R2.9bn infrastructure plan to build 21 new schools and 289 new classrooms at existing schools.

But following budget cuts from National Treasury, the department [scaled back](#) to just ten new schools, along with additional classrooms. “Without the appropriate level of funding it is going to be very difficult to keep up with [population growth], nevermind replacing and refurbishing schools,” Maynier told GroundUp.

The DA-led Western Cape Government has been [critical](#) of these cuts since the Medium Term Budget Statement in early November and declared an [intergovernmental dispute](#) with the national government in late November.

In the meantime, many high schools are overwhelmed with applications. A secretary at Claremont High School in Cape Town said they received roughly 4,500 applications for only 105 Grade 8 spots. When the school was founded in 2011, they got about 600 applications for Grade 8.

A secretary at York High School in George told GroundUp they received close to 800 applications for 200 Grade 8 placements. This has doubled over the last five years, as they received about 400 Grade 8 applications for the 2019 school year.

Western Cape regional director of Equal Education, an organisation advocating for quality and equality in the South African education system, Nontikelelo Dlulani, said there were parents camped outside the schools Equal Education visited in the Cape Town suburbs of Kraaifontein, Strand, and Khayelitsha this week.

Dlulani said most parents were turned away and sent to the education department’s district office, which she said was also not able to help. For some parents, it was their second year waiting outside the district office.

She said parents told Equal Education they would get no response when making inquiries at the department, their children would be rejected from all three schools they applied for, and some would have their children placed in schools tens of

kilometres away.

She said there were teachers who told her their classes have about 60 learners, which was more than they could control.

“We need more schools, the department needs to play its role,” she said.

Gauteng school placements challenged

Gauteng Department of Education spokesperson Steve Mabona said the department had found place for all Grade 8 applicants. Mabona said the department had allocated funding to schools experiencing a high-demand for placements in order for 1,745 extra classrooms to be built.

He said the department has built 341 mobile schools for both primary and secondary schools in the province. Attempts by GroundUp to obtain the total number of school applicants for 2024 were ignored.

But the school placements were not practical for all learners. About [30 parents gathered](#) outside Florida Park High in Johannesburg on Wednesday and Thursday, demanding their children be admitted to the school as it was close to where they live. Parents interviewed said the department had placed their children at schools far away, incurring transport costs they could not afford. Other parents said their children had been placed in Afrikaans medium schools, a language with which their children were not familiar.

In Ekurhuleni, more than 20 parents from Tsakane protested at Mamelongu Secondary School, criticising the Department of Education’s online application system and demanding their children be admitted to Grade 8.

The parents gathered at Mamelongu Secondary as they had heard the department’s district representatives were coming to the school to address all parents whose children had not yet been placed in Grade 8. They said the online application system had failed them. However, department officials did not arrive.

Some parents said their children had been turned away from schools because their files were not on the system despite having applied, while others said their children had been placed at schools that were too far away, or did not teach in their children’s home language. Other parents were seeking Grade 9 admission for their children.

Zinhle Zulu said her daughter had been placed at Tholulwazi Secondary School, which was far from their home. Zulu said her daughter needed to attend Buhlebomfundo Secondary School, which is much closer.

“When we applied online, there was no sign of the schools that we wanted. The district office said we should accept the schools as they are. It’s out of the question because that school is far away,” she said.

“The department should do away with the online application system because it does not work at all. Our children are crying because they are not in school with others,” said Tebogo Malahleni.

Nomsa Sewedi said her child had been placed in an Afrikaans school, and she wanted him to go to an isiZulu-speaking school. “These days, schools want us to help our children with homework. How can I help when I do not know Afrikaans?” she said.

Equal Education’s head of organising Gauteng, Tevin Mahlangu, said it was “no secret” that Grade 8 had the most overcrowded classes in Gauteng.

Mahlangu said schools were forced to admit more learners than they could accommodate, and believed there were learners in the province who had still not been placed.

“With too few classes and too few teachers ... it will be a challenging year,” he said.

KwaZulu-Natal sees reduction in unplaced high school learners

KwaZulu-Natal education department spokesperson Muzi Mahlambi said 340,000 Grade 8 learners had been admitted, with only 500 applications outstanding.

Attempts to obtain further information from Mahlambi were ignored, but according to a department press statement released on 14 January, the number of unplaced learners had reduced from the previous year. The department advised parents who still had not secured a place for their child or who had late applications to visit their closest Circuit Management Centre.

High schools contacted in and around Pietermaritzburg indicated they were not oversubscribed.

Siyahlomula Secondary School in Pietermaritzburg still had about 80 spaces available for Grade 8 learners, said principal Mbongiseni Ngubane.

Phayipini Secondary School, also in Pietermaritzburg, stated they were almost at capacity for Grade 8, but might have some openings due to some registered learners not taking up their places.

Msuduzi ward 19 committee member for education, Zandile Mbanjwa, said learners not taking up their place at a school was normal as they may have chosen a different school and neglected to inform other schools where they had been accepted.

Mbanjwa said there had been no issue with Grade 8 placements in the ward.

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