

The Star

Documentary highlights education collapse Published May 23, 2008

By Angelique Serrao

A film that followed four Grade 12 pupils through their final year has led to an outcry that South Africa's education system is in crisis and that something drastic needs to be done to save it.

Molly Blank, the director of *Testing Hope: Grade 12 in the New South Africa*, filmed the documentary in the Western Cape in 2006.

The pupils from Oscar Mpetha Secondary School are faced with the difficulties that are found in many townships all over South Africa. Many children go to school hungry, and gang culture lures many into its grip.

The pass rate is 60 percent at the school, a big drop from previous years

Amid all the hardship, a Grade 12 certificate stands out as the one hope, and there is enormous pressure from parents for children to pass the exams and lead their families out of poverty.

Despite being crowded 80 into a class and facing conditions in stark contrast to the former Model C schools, these kids work their butts off to pass their exams. They

have big dreams.

"Matric is the last ticket to life," said one.

"I want to get the As - and then when I get the As, I'm going to be a doctor. That is what I dream of," said another.

But despite all their hard work and all the power and belief parents and teachers pour into them, it just isn't enough. The pass rate is 60 percent at the school, a big drop from previous years, and those who do make the grade don't find the money to study further.

Schools are surrounded by 'vultures - these grey-eyed young men looking for girls and drugs'

The film was shown in Joburg on Thursday to education experts, teachers, principals, Department of Education officials and union members.

All expressed shock at seeing something that most knew all along: a dysfunctional education system that is failing the majority of our children.

In an article which ran in the *Cape Times*, an education specialist at the Development Bank of Southern Africa, Graeme Bloch, explained how serious the problem is.

"In matric, disparities remain: 39,4 percent of black candidates failed last year against 1,6 percent of whites. Exemptions for black students in matric in 2007 (10,9 percent versus 52 percent for whites) show that little has changed since 1991, when the figure was 10,8 percent.

"Half of all black learners drop out. By any measure, 60-80 percent of our schools are dysfunctional, achieving poor education outcomes."

After seeing the film, a teacher said: "This school reflects exactly what is happening in my school. We had a pass rate of 80 percent and we dropped to 30 percent. There are some factors that are beyond your powers. If a learner tells you they have no electricity, what do you do?"

Professor Jonathan Jansen, of the University of the Witwatersrand, said: "There is nothing wrong with these kids - we are the ones who have failed them."

Jansen said he spent last week in schools in Soweto and saw the major problems which beset our schools: Teachers are absent; principals who may or may not be there; if teachers are there, they are not teaching; the school grounds are filthy; and schools are surrounded by "vultures - these grey-eyed young men looking for girls and drugs".

He said one of the major problems was a political culture that resisted any change.

"The moment you suggest you want to change anything in a school, Sadtu (South African Democratic Teachers' Union) is there immediately.

"The Sadtu congresses in the 1980s had people of integrity, but now we have thugs who look like they have just rolled out of a prison bed."

Jansen said the only way to change education was through political intervention and a national summit that signalled the urgency of education.

He added that the Department of Education must stop any new "confusing" policies from being implemented in the next five years.

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