

How edtech and data can set the stage for transformation in the SA education system

By [Leigh Anne Albert](#)

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Former South African president and international human rights icon Nelson Rolihlala Mandela once said, "No country can really develop unless its citizens are educated."



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Education is central to the country's long-term development and key to achieving the goals set out in the National Development Plan of eliminating poverty and unemployment. And essential to a good education system, is that it equips children at an early age with the basic literacy and numeracy skills needed to ensure future success in life.

The 2016 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) revealed that almost 80% of Grade 4s in South Africa cannot read for meaning and the 2015 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), that the country's children have some of the worst numeracy skills in the world.

Studies like this tell us that despite the progress we, as a nation, have made - we still have a way to go.



PIRLS report shows 80% of SA children struggle to read at appropriate level

11 Dec 2017



Data and technology

Quality data and technology are important tools for addressing the gaps in our education system. When educators have access to quality data - in particular around where our children are doing well and where their deficits are - they can make better decisions when it comes to intervening and improving the efficacy of teaching instruction in the classroom.

It also provides us with a benchmarking mechanism against which to measure our progress and a way in which to gauge whether or not what we're doing, is working.

The latter is particularly important in South Africa, where we typically have strong strategies and policies but where we struggle to implement them as well as to evaluate their success. Data can give us a clear understanding of whether or not a strategy is working and moreover, if it is an effective means through which we can achieve our broader policy goals.

‘Success by Numbers’ and ‘Beyond the Numbers’

In 2012, the Michael & Susan Dell Foundation - together with the Department of Basic Education and with the support of the National Education Collaboration Trust (NECT) - published the *Success by Numbers* report.

The report looked at how data was being collected, analysed and accessed in the country's education system at the time along with the obstacles - and the opportunities - that existed.

Now, six years on, the *Beyond the Numbers* report draws on comprehensive research - including over 120 interviews and 1,200 survey responses - to explore the progress made since then and puts forward a set of recommendations to accelerate this programme.



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In South Africa, we have a large, decentralised system and a finite number of resources and one of the most important objectives of this project is to show how we can use data to establish the best way to make use of our resources.

But in order to do this, we need to improve the way we collect, access and analyse data.

Collecting, accessing and analysing quality data

We need to collect data that provides us with real answers to real questions, which means we need to know what we are working towards and we need to ensure that the data we are collecting provides us with the necessary insights to ascertain whether or not we are moving in the right direction.

We also need to drive access to this data. We need our teachers and educators to actually engage with it. Only then will they see its value and be able to use it.

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And finally, we need to pull it together and consolidate it so that we form a “big picture” view and can track the learning journeys of our children, our schools, our districts, our provinces and our country.

The result of thorough and extensive research, the *Beyond the Numbers* report gives us a clear picture of where we come from, where we are, as well as where we should be headed; and its findings provide us with the insights we need to get there.

At the Michael & Susan Dell Foundation, we applaud the work already done by stakeholders across the board - including the department and the NECT - to reach this point and we encourage them to continue on this journey.

This is, after all, a marathon and not a sprint.

Beyond the Numbers report can be accessed here: www.msdf.org/other-reports/beyond-the-numbers

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