



## GETTING THE KIDS TO SCHOOL: THE TRANSPORT CHALLENGE FOR LEARNERS IN SOUTH AFRICA

7 September 2007

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The Department of Transport (DoT) positions itself as *The Heartbeat of South Africa's Economic Growth and Social Development*. The DoT is seen not only as an enabler of motorised and non-motorised transport, but it also has the broader mandate of contributing to the achievement of the 6% Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative for South Africa (ASGISA) growth rate, whilst contributing to social development.

In order to maintain the heartbeat of the economy, it is necessary to develop human capital to sustain economic growth levels. Education is key to developing young minds to understand and meet the challenges of the future. However, for many South African learners, many of whom are mired in poverty, travelling to school, often with gnawing hunger pangs, is a challenge in itself. This paper explores the transport challenges that learners in South Africa endure in order to travel to school.

### 2. SCHOOLING IN SOUTH AFRICA

Historically, education has played a revolutionary and transformatory role in South African society. During the 1976 Soweto uprising, it was the schools that became hotbeds of dissent and rebellion against the apartheid government's insistence in using Afrikaans as medium of instruction at township schools. The revolutionary fervour that swept the country during the 1980s was carried forward by learners at schools in Soweto, the Cape Flats, Port Elizabeth and in many other cities and towns across South Africa.

Schools have a history of being involved in changing the conditions that they find themselves in. Learners have demonstrated that they have the ability to triumph over conditions and circumstances that hamper and prohibit them from receiving a quality education. With the dawn of a new political dispensation in 1994, one of the major challenges was to transform schools from violent battlegrounds to centres of learning. Learners, having achieved the liberatory goals that were fostered for decades, were called upon help to build the nation. However, thirteen years after the dawn of democracy in South Africa, learners are still faced with a multitude of problems that impact negatively on the process of learning. One of the factors that impacts on the education of learners is the lack of reliable and safe transport to schools.

### 3. LEARNER STATISTICS IN SOUTH AFRICA

#### 3.1 School statistics

According to 2005 statistics (see Table 1) from the Department of Education,<sup>1</sup> there were approximately 12.2 million learners at public and independent schools in South Africa.

<sup>1</sup> Department of Education (2006).



**Table 1: Learner numbers in South Africa**

PROVINCE	TYPE OF SCHOOL	LEARNERS		
		Number	As Percentage of Provincial Total	As Percentage of National Total
Eastern Cape	Public	2 179 138	98.8	18.3
	Independent	27 437	1.2	8.7
	Total	2 206 575		18.1
Free State	Public	655 233	98.0	5.5
	Independent	13 691	2.0	4.3
	Total	668 924		5.5
Gauteng	Public	1 599 685	91.7	13.5
	Independent	145 693	8.3	46.2
	Total	1 745 378		14.3
KwaZulu-Natal	Public	2 675 993	98.4	22.5
	Independent	44 003	1.6	14.0
	Total	2 719 996		22.3
Limpopo	Public	1 885 508	98.9	15.9
	Independent	20 974	1.1	6.7
	Total	1 906 482		15.6
Mpumalanga	Public	893 040	97.7	7.5
	Independent	21 172	2.3	6.7
	Total	914 212		7.5
North West	Public	836 159	98.8	7.0
	Independent	9 783	1.2	3.1
	Total	845 942		6.9
Northern Cape	Public	207 688	98.8	1.7
	Independent	2 464	1.2	0.8
	Total	210 152		1.7
Western Cape	Public	949 925	96.9	8.0
	Independent	30 140	3.1	9.6
	Total	980 065		8.0
National	Public	11 882 369	97.4	
	Independent	315 357	2.6	
	Total	12 197 726		

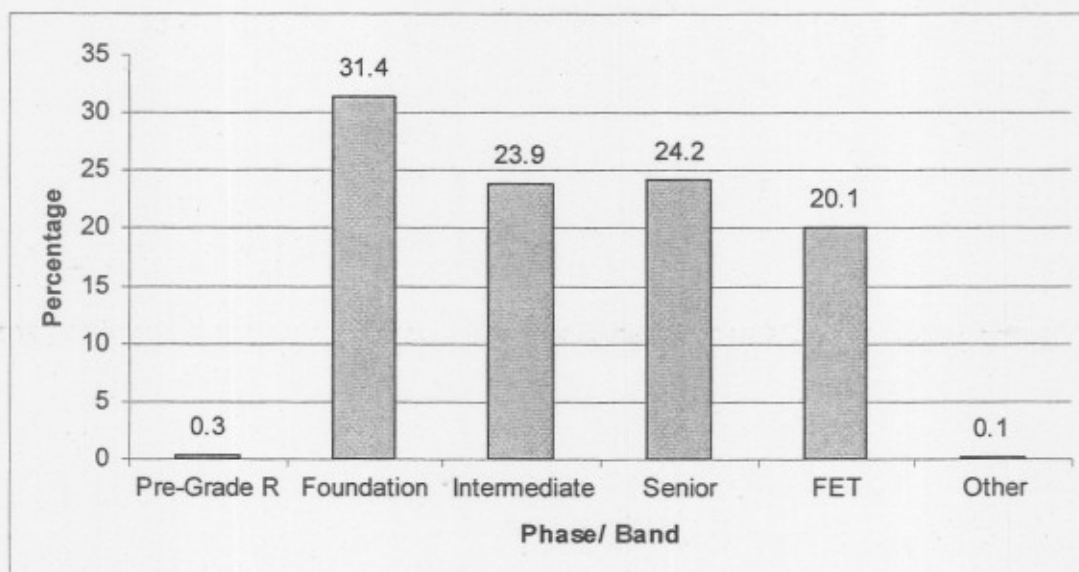
(Source: Adapted from Department of Education, 2006)

The learners were accommodated in 25 599 schools and were taught by 381 896 educators. The national educator-to-learner ratio is approximately 1:32. This ratio masks the disparities between schools, districts and provinces. Independent schools have lower educator-learner ratios. In public schools in KwaZulu-Natal the educator/pupil ratio was 1:34.3 and in Limpopo it was 1:34.1 which is above the national average. The most



learners were found in the provinces of KwaZulu-Natal (2.7 million learners), Eastern Cape (2.2 million learners) and Limpopo (1.9 million learners).

On average, schools had an enrolment of 459 learners across the various phases or bands. School phases or bands consisted of the pre-Foundation phase (Grade R), Foundation Phase (Grades 1 – 3), Intermediate Phase (Grades 4 – 6), Senior Phase (Grades 7 – 9) and the Further Education and Training Band (FET) (Grades 10 – 12). The largest percentage of school-going children are those in the Foundation Phase, usually between the ages of 6 and 9 years old (see Figure 1). The number of learners at pre-primary and primary school level are 7 719 646, which accounts for approximately 64% of the total number of learners in South Africa.<sup>2</sup>



(Source: Department of Education, 2006)

**Figure 1: Learner distribution by school phase/band**

### 3.2 Mobility statistics

Travel trips by learners to educational centres form an important part of the national travel environment. According to the DoT National Travel Survey,<sup>3</sup> the majority of learners<sup>4</sup> walked to their place of education – this translates to approximately 71% of urban learners and 91% of rural learners.

Other modes of travel utilised by learners to get to places of education, in especially urban areas, were the use of taxis and private vehicles. The survey calculated that 13.7% of learners use taxis in urban areas, compared to 3.7% of learners in rural areas. The study defined taxis as those known as minibus taxis, but also included

<sup>2</sup> Primary school learners are found in the Foundation phase, Intermediate Phase and Senior Phase called Grade 1 – 7 (previously called Sub A & B and Standard 1 to 5).

<sup>3</sup> Department of Transport (2005).

<sup>4</sup> The DoT report includes post-matric institutions, adult literacy and adult education entities in its statistics on trips to educational centres.



bakkies, light delivery vehicles (LDVs) and sedan taxis. Learners transported by private vehicles accounted for 13.6% of trips in urban areas as compared to 1.8% of learners transported by private vehicles in rural areas. Buses were used by 10.5% of learners in urban areas and by 2% of learners in rural areas. In the provinces of North West and Mpumalanga, buses are the third-most used mode of transport for learners, after walking and taxis. On the whole, trains were seldom used, with some patronage by learners in the Western Cape and Gauteng. Bicycles, metered taxis, trucks, tractor-trailers and animal transport<sup>5</sup> were very rarely used.

**Table 2: Main modes of travel by learners per province**

Province	Number travelling	Usual main mode (% of trips within province)					
		Train	Bus	Taxi	Car	Walk	Other
Western Cape	1 351 000	3.4	4.7	9.0	20.0	56.3	6.6
Eastern Cape	2 583 000	0.3	1.3	6.9	4.2	86.3	0.9
Northern Cape	237 000	0.0	5.5	6.8	8.3	77.4	1.9
Free State	934 000	0.0	3.3	9.7	6.0	79.1	1.9
KwaZulu-Natal	3 472 000	0.4	4.5	8.4	6.8	79.0	1.0
North West	1 333 000	0.7	6.0	10.6	5.5	75.0	2.3
Gauteng	2 396 000	3.0	4.8	17.9	17.1	55.3	1.9
Mpumalanga	1 218 000	0.0	5.8	6.3	4.7	80.3	2.8
Limpopo	2 218 000	0.0	1.3	3.5	2.2	92.3	0.6

(Source: Department of Transport, 2005, p. 93)

The national statistics mask the provincial variations in the utilisation of different modes of transport by learners. Table 2 highlights these provincial variations. Walking to school displays a clear rural-urban bias with it being less pronounced in the more urbanised provinces of Gauteng and the Western Cape. On average, more than 80% of learners walk to school in the provinces of Limpopo, Eastern Cape and Mpumalanga. This correlates closely with the provinces that have the largest number of learners.

In addition, as shown in Table 3, 84% of primary school learners and 74% of high school learners walk to school. Eleven percent of high school learners use taxis and five percent of them use a bus to get to school. One should bear in mind that many learners use multiple modes of transport to travel to school and thus mobility patterns of many learners reflect the utilisation of a combination of transport modes.

<sup>5</sup> The Eastern Cape MEC for Transport has introduced horse- and donkey-drawn steel and aluminium carts to, *inter alia*, as a mode of transport for rural learners in the province (Homer, 2006).





**Table 3: Mode of travel preference as per type of school**

Establishment type	Number travelling	Usual main mode (% of trips to establishment)					
		Train	Bus	Taxi	Car	Walk	Other
Pre-School	1 506 000	0.1	1.2	9.7	18.4	68.5	2.0
Primary School	8 291 000	0.2	2.7	5.5	6.2	83.8	1.6
High School	5 161 000	1.1	5.3	10.9	6.2	74.3	2.2
Post-matric	626 000	10.8	9.9	36.1	25.0	16.4	1.9

(Source: Department of Transport, 2005, p. 95)

The travel time from home to school for all modes of transport for 70% of learners was less than 30 minutes. However, 30% of learners travelled for more than 30 minutes to school. Of these, 7% of learners travelled for more than 1 hour. This translates to a national figure of approximately 853 000 learners who travel from home to school for more than an hour. If the return journey is added, then approximately 850 000 learners across South Africa spend two or more hours travelling to and from school each day. As shown in Table 4 below, there are variations of travel time between provinces. KwaZulu-Natal, North West and Gauteng are the provinces that have the largest proportion of learners travelling more than 2 hours a day between their home and school. The lack of access to transport in mainly rural provinces could impact on the lengthy travel times. Conversely, the utilisation of various modes of transport and the time spent commuting could be a factor in the lengthy travel times in Gauteng.

**Table 4: Travel times to educational institutions per province**

Province	Number travelling	Travel time (% of trips within province)				
		1-15 mins	16-30 mins	31-45 mins	46-60 mins	> 60 mins
Western Cape	1 351 000	49.5	30.8	8.4	6.5	4.7
Eastern Cape	2 583 000	37.6	33.3	11.3	11.5	6.3
Northern Cape	237 000	48.1	37.1	9.9	3.1	1.8
Free State	934 000	46.4	33.3	9.1	6.6	4.6
KwaZulu-Natal	3 472 000	22.8	35.5	16.6	14.6	10.4
North West	1 333 000	33.0	35.6	12.2	9.8	9.4
Gauteng	2 396 000	32.8	35.5	13.7	9.9	8.1
Mpumalanga	1 218 000	34.8	36.9	11.6	10.0	6.7
Limpopo	2 218 000	41.6	37.7	9.6	7.8	3.2

(Source: Department of Transport, 2005, p. 96)

An overview of learner mobility in South Africa indicates that not only do most learners walk to school; most of those that walk are at pre-primary and primary schools. Learners that use motorised and other non-motorised forms of transport are in the minority. Nevertheless, regardless of what mode of transport is used, each type present particular dangers to learners. In addition, one third of learners spend more than 30 minutes travel time



from home to school. A closer investigation into various modes of transport utilised by learners will paint a picture of the challenges that is faced within each mode.

#### 4. TRANSPORT CHOICES FOR LEARNERS

##### 4.1 Walking

Walking is the most common mode of transport used by learners to get to school. As previously mentioned, close to 91% of rural learners and 71% of urban learners walk to school. An analysis of walking by learners shows that approximately 33% of learners in rural areas spent more than 30 minutes walking to school. In comparison, 15% of learners in urban areas spent more than 30 minutes walking to school. More rural learners undertook long daily walks to get to school. As shown in Table 5 below, approximately 40% of learners in KwaZulu-Natal, 27% of learners in the Eastern Cape and 25% of learners in North West spent more than 30 minutes walking to school.

**Table 5: Walking times to educational institutions**

Province	Number walking	Percentage of walking trips				
		1-15 mins	16-30 mins	31-45 mins	46-60 mins	> 60 mins
Western Cape	759 000	62.8	30.6	3.7	2.1	0.8
Eastern Cape	2 226 000	39.8	33.6	10.5	10.9	5.2
Northern Cape	182 000	49.6	38.7	9.3	2.0	0.4
Free State	736 000	49.7	33.3	7.7	5.6	3.7
KwaZulu-Natal	2 731 000	23.7	36.4	16.8	13.9	9.2
North West	996 000	36.3	38.3	12.1	8.6	4.7
Gauteng	1 305 000	41.6	40.3	10.8	5.4	1.9
Mpumalanga	973 000	37.6	36.8	11.8	8.8	5.0
Limpopo	2 045 000	43.1	37.7	9.3	7.3	2.6

(Source: Department of Transport, 2005, p. 97)

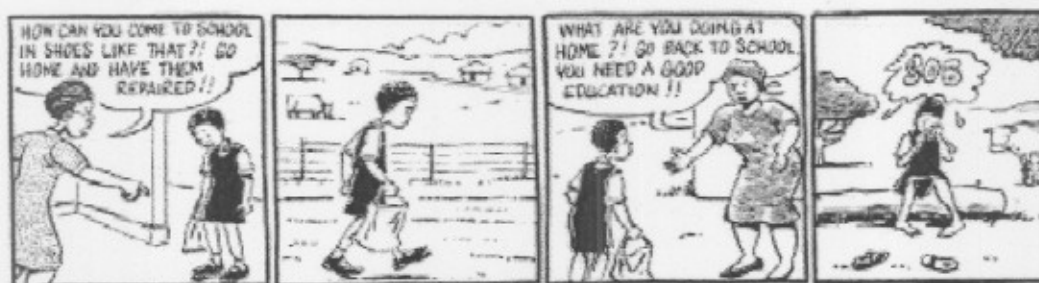
Walking long distances to school in rural areas present certain challenges to learners. There is often transport available, but the costs thereof is prohibitive and thus walking becomes the only mode of transport available to them. Rural poverty has contributed to learners not having breakfast or having just a cup of tea or coffee before setting out to walk the journey to school.<sup>6</sup> Learners arrive at school hungry and then are required to concentrate on lessons. School feeding programmes have, to a certain degree, alleviated the impact of the lack of proper nutrition on learners.

Poverty-stricken households can often not afford to buy shoes for learners. Furthermore, walking long distances to school on unpaved roads or gravel tracks contribute to the rapid deterioration of school shoes (as illustrated in the cartoon in Figure 2). Learners who walk on rural roads that do not have a pedestrian pavement are exposed to vehicular traffic and are always in danger of being a road accident victim. Children that walk alone to

<sup>6</sup> Human Sciences Research Council (2005).



school may fall prey to physical and sexual attack. School principals have indicated that if learners had transport to and from schools then the rate of sexual abuse would decrease.<sup>7</sup>



(Source: Human Sciences Research Council, 2005)

**Figure 2: Excessive walking wears out shoes**

Walking exposes learners to wild animals and adverse weather conditions. Wind, heat, rain and floods may impede the journey to schools (see Figure 3). When this occurs, learners would stay at home and miss out on school.



Getting to school in the Northern Cape, 2005. Every summer, when the river floods, these learners use a self-built raft to traverse it during their long walk to school.  
(Source: Dugard *et al.*, 2005)

**Figure 3: Transport challenges faced by learners**

<sup>7</sup> Polity.org.za





In a study of Western Cape farm schools de Graaf *et al* (1990) refers to "crushing" walks of 10km to 30km as not being too uncommon – that was around sixteen years ago. Although the situation has improved, a study of farm schools in the Western Cape and Mpumalanga by Dugard *et al* (2005) has revealed that on average learners walk around seven to twelve kilometres to school each day – a journey that takes between one and two hours. However, a Human Rights Watch report states that in severe cases learners walk up to 30 kilometres each way, daily.<sup>8</sup> The large numbers of learners that walk these distances has forced schools to have different starting times in winter and summer. Schools often start an hour late in order to accommodate the latecomers who have left home at 06:30. The lack of scholar transport and the distance to school results in many learners deciding forego an education.<sup>9</sup>

Walking to school in urban areas also poses risks to learners. Eighty five percent of learners that walk to school in urban areas have a travel journey of less than 30 minutes. Approximately 15% of learners walk to school for more than 30 minutes, which is less than half the number compared to the rural situation. Nevertheless, the risks are still present. Learners in urban areas are also vulnerable to sexual abuse and criminal attack. In addition, the non-adherence to speed limits by South Africa's motoring public put learners that walk to school at risk. The reduction of speed limits around all schools would do much in limiting the impact of pedestrian road accidents.

#### 4.2 Taxis<sup>10</sup>

It is mostly learners in urban areas that use taxis to get to schools. Younger learners often travel unaccompanied or in a larger group of learners. The narrow profit-margin operating environment that minibus taxi drivers work in often forms the basis for speeding and overcrowding of taxis. Learners are exposed to the same dangerous conditions in minibus taxis that other passengers are exposed to.

It is often the case that because learners are physically smaller than adults, they are crammed more tightly into minibuses taxis. This enables the driver to collect larger trip takings due to more passengers in the minibus taxi. This practice, together with unlicensed and unroadworthy taxis and reckless drivers, is a recipe for disaster should the minibus taxi be in an accident. The media have reported up to nineteen learners in a minibus taxi that was the cause of a major accident. In another accident three educators were killed whilst travelling by minibus taxi.<sup>11</sup>

Literature suggests that female learners are often physically harassed by taxi drivers and are coerced into sitting in the "jump seat" next to the driver. This exposes female learners to uninvited sexual conversations. Female learners are placed in a position whereby they are eventually coerced into exchanging sexual favours for free transport and the peer "prestige" that it offers.<sup>12</sup> Learners transported by sedan taxis are not immune to physical violence and reports of crimes against learners by the drivers of sedan taxis have surfaced.<sup>13</sup> The 2006 minibus taxi strike in the Western Cape have led to learners not being able to attend schools to write matric exams.<sup>14</sup> This is an indication of the importance of transport in the education ambitions of learners at school.

<sup>8</sup> Human Rights Watch (2004).

<sup>9</sup> Dugard *et al.* (2005).

<sup>10</sup> Taxis include minibus taxis, sedan taxis, bakkies and LDVs.

<sup>11</sup> Seale (2006); Sapa (2006a).

<sup>12</sup> Abrahams (2006).

<sup>13</sup> Sapa (2006b).

<sup>14</sup> Collison (2006).





There has been an increasing trend, especially in urban areas, for individuals with minibuses to transport schoolchildren from townships to schools in other areas. These drivers are not taxi drivers or taxi owners but operate a "shuttle" service for schoolchildren. Parents would then pay the operator for the service. The vehicles are not licensed, do not have permits for the transport of learners and often are unroadworthy.

In rural areas it has been found that learners are transported to school by bakkie or LDV. Learners are loaded on the back of a bakkie or LDV without regard for their safety and comfort. It should be taken into account that should a bakkie or LDV be involved in accident, there is nothing to protect, shield or restrain those in the back from the impact. Inadequately maintained gravel roads adds to the danger when fully laden bakkies and LDVs travel at excessive speed.

#### 4.3 Bus transport

In many areas there are school buses that transport the learners to school. The use of bus transport by learners is more prevalent in urban areas as compared to its use in rural areas. Learners in urban areas tend to use metro bus services. In provinces where funds are available, the Provincial Department of Education subsidises bus transport for learners in rural areas. Private bus operators usually own the buses. Schools also use buses to take learners on educational trips or outings.

Unfortunately, there are a number of problems with bus services for learners. Should a learner, for any reason, miss the school bus then he/she either has to walk to school or be absent for the day. Sometimes parents are required to contribute to the payment of the bus transport for their children. Learners whose parents have defaulted on the payment of the bus fare are not allowed to travel on the school bus and learners are again forced to walk to school or be absent from school. There have also been complaints of buses being overcrowded.<sup>15</sup>

In rural areas, the bus stop is often an hour-long walk from the homes of learners. In the Western Cape scholar transport is provided for learners in rural areas that live beyond a five-kilometre radius of the school. However, young learners living within the determined radius have to walk for up to two hours and therefore the five-kilometre radius may have to be revised. The need for rural scholar transport outweighs what is being currently provided in other provinces. Bus services in rural areas are often sporadic with no set timetables.

Inefficiencies by Provincial Education Departments in providing subsidised bus transport impact negatively on learners. During July 2006, bus operators in Gauteng refused to transport learners because monies owing to them by the Provincial Education Department were outstanding. This left learners stranded<sup>16</sup> and resulted in chaos as learners vented their frustration and anger at the lack of transport. Learners are aware of the vital role that transport plays in their education and as was the case during the 1970s and 1980s, the learners took the lead in demanding that action be taken. There have been tragedies involving buses transporting learners. The Leondale bus tragedy in Johannesburg in 2005 in which a learner was killed, four were critically injured, fifteen seriously injured and 125 with minor injuries, is an example of the scale of one bus accident.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Ramadiro (2002).

<sup>16</sup> Cembali (2006).

<sup>17</sup> Gifford (2005).



It is vitally important that regular checks of buses for safety and roadworthiness be undertaken in an attempt to limit the number of bus accidents. Compared to other modes of transport, the greater number of learners that are transported in a single bus, inevitably means that the scope for disaster is so much greater.

## 5. Conclusion

One of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) is to achieve universal primary education, but there are a number of transport-related challenges that learners, both urban and rural, have to overcome in order to access their Constitutionally entrenched right to education. The lack of suitable transport options and the cost of transport<sup>18</sup> are daily challenges that learners have to endure. Rural schools experience levels of non-attendance and high dropout rates of learners due to the problem of accessing transport and the long distances that learners have to walk to school. Sexual and physical exploitation of learners while on their way to school is a pervasive reality.

The DoT has initiated the Shova Kalula (Pedal Easy) bicycle project that is specifically aimed at distributing bicycles to rural learners to ease their transport difficulties. The DoT has developed a Rural Transport Strategy, where the transport of rural learners falls under the special-needs transportation services section. However, Wilson (2004) has recognised that while there are provincial transport initiatives for learners, there is no national programme of school transport for learners. The DoT would be instrumental in championing such a programme. In addition, the DoT is instrumental in considering the transport challenges and safety of learners in all their land transport policies and strategies. Learner safety must be aligned with and embedded in broader strategies of road safety. The DoT should work closely with the Department of Education in order to facilitate a proactive, multi-faceted approach to learner transport problems. It is only through a concerted multi-sectoral approach to transport challenges faced by learners that the Constitutional right to education would be realised for all learners in South Africa.

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<sup>18</sup> South African Human Rights Commission (2006).



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