

Record heights for local schools

By ASHLEY WESTAWAY

ANALYSIS



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The public school Class of 2018 has produced the best set of matric results in the history of Makhanda (Grahamstown). The pass rate, the number of successful candidates, the Bachelor rate and the number of Bachelor passes have all hit record highs. The overall local pass rate was 78% (436 out of the 558 candidates entered) and the city's public schools produced over 200 Bachelor passes for the first time ever. In fact, as many as 238 candidates (43% of the total cohort) reached this significant milestone. Most encouragingly, these significant improvements were driven by two no-fee schools, namely Ntsika and Nombulelo.

A look at the cohort

The full cohort of 2018 (referring to the total number of full-time matriculants entered by their respective schools to write all seven subjects) was 558 candidates, an increase of 11% compared with the 2017 cohort. This is a significant statistic because it reflects candidates who were entered into the final examinations on merit. The two schools that accounted for the increase in cohort size were Ntsika and Nombulelo, with the latter contributing the lion's share. Schools where the matric classes diminished were Mary Waters and TEM Mrwetyana. We can confidently say that the former was something of an anomaly since the Mary Waters class of 2019 is considerably larger than last year's group.

A necessary condition for Makhanda (Grahamstown) to emerge as a city of genuine educational excellence is for the cohort size to increase significantly, to 750 at minimum. This would be in line with the 'retention rate' in the Western Cape, which has by far the lowest drop-out rate in the country.

Of Makhanda (Grahamstown) 2018 Grade 12s, all in the city's no-fee schools, 163 were 'progressed' from Grade 11, meaning that they failed that grade but were pushed through into matric in line with government policy. The problem for these learners is that they were required to

pass their June and Trial examinations in order to qualify to write all seven subjects. They failed to do this and were thus modularised, meaning that they were required to select three of their six subjects (excluding Life Orientation) to write as a 'module' of examinations in November 2018. They were then cast out of the school system and have to have immense fortitude and resolve to prepare themselves for their second module of examinations (in their other three subjects) in June 2019. Very few, if any, will succeed; 'modularisation' is the evil twin of 'progression'.

We can be quite direct and forthright that a clear strategy to move toward the target cohort number of 750 is to improve pass rates in Grade 11. In the short-term, the two schools that are most strategic in this regard are Nombulelo and Mary Waters, but the ultimate truth is that unless the serious systemic problems at Nathaniel Nyaluza and TEM Mrwetyana are addressed, the public sector will be unable to reduce the drop-out/push-out rate to below 40%.

After taking cognisance of the 558 full-time candidates and 163 modularised learners, we are left with close to 500 of the young people who entered Grade 1 in 2007 who we cannot account for today, in educational terms at least. The fundamental reason that Grahamstown, like all other places in the Eastern Cape and most regions of the country in fact, has so many outright drop-outs is that most local no-fee primary schools are failing to teach our children how to read, write and do arithmetic. Unless and until the primary sector is held to account in this regard, the high schools will necessarily bleed hundreds of learners, year-in and year-out.

Analysis of the performance of the 558 full-time candidates

Grahamstown's Class of 2018

performed very well across all performance measures. Typically, the pass rate is used as the overall indicator; this is quite reasonable since obtaining a National Senior Certificate (NSC) is an important achievement and has significant implications in relation to employability, amongst other factors. Similarly, the number and percentage of Bachelor passes are assessed to determine top-end or good quality performance. 'Bachelor' refers to obtaining a NSC of good enough quality to be admitted by a university for Bachelor degree studies.

Both the number of passes achieved and the overall percentage pass rate are significantly up from 2017. The number of successful candidates increased by 15%, climbing from 380 to a new Grahamstown record of 436. This increase was driven by Nombulelo and, to a lesser extent, Ntsika. The Nombulelo numbers are remarkable; whereas the school produced 41 passes in 2017, in 2018 this number more than doubled to breach the 100 mark! Similarly, the pass rate climbed three percentage points from the 2017 mark, to reach a record pass rate of marginally higher than 78%. The primary reason that this historic high has been achieved is that six of the city's nine schools produced pass rates of over 80%.

Whereas the community of Makhanda (Grahamstown) is accustomed to the fee-paying schools invariably obtaining close to perfect rates (in fact, perfect in the case of Victoria Girls!) we have never before seen three no-fee schools obtain 80% or above in the same year. Ntsika, Nombulelo and Mary Waters thus go down in history as Grahamstown's first triumvirate of successful no-fee high schools. Encouragingly, this points to an equalising of basic education in the city and to improved educational opportunities being created for poor and working-class youth.

This claim (of a levelling of the educational playing field) is further substantiated when considering the remarkable improvement in the number of Bachelor passes produced in 2018, from 197 (the previ-



Ntsika Secondary School principal Madeleine Schoeman (seated) gives matriculants the good news about their results on 4 January 2019. Ntsika and Nombulelo drove Grahamstown's public school 2018 matric pass rate up to 78%. Photo: Azlan Makalima

ous record) all the way up to 238. All of this improvement is due to greater contributions from the no-fee sector. To be explicit, whereas the previous record number of Bachelor passes produced by this sector was 62, in 2018 it produced 102 Bachelor passes. This is probably the most dramatic and significant statistic of all from the local 2018 matric results! (The number of Bachelor passes produced in the fee-paying schools was flat, increased marginally from 135 in 2017 to 136 in 2018). In this regard, two schools namely Ntsika and Nombulelo stand head and shoulders above the rest. It is thus apt to say a few words about each.

The Ntsika fairy-tale continues unabated... Under the dedicated leadership of Principal Madeleine Schoeman, the school has gone from strength to strength. For the past five years, every year the cohort size has increased (from 47 in 2014 to 93 in 2018), number of passes has increased (from 38 in 2014 to 79 in 2018) and the number of Bachelors has skyrocketed from 7 in 2014 to 36 in 2018.

Performance at the top-end was particularly encouraging in 2018, with an unprecedented number of learners registered for Mathematics and Physical Sciences. For the second consecutive year, the school produced the top

achiever from the no-fee sector in the Sarah Baartman District; Usiphile Gazi obtained distinctions in Physical Sciences, Life Sciences, Geography and isiXhosa.

Whereas improvements at Ntsika have been steady over a protracted period, 2018 saw Nombulelo surging forward in a surprisingly dramatic fashion. Anybody who follows local schooling knows that inspirational Principal Nicci Hayes has made her mark since taking the hot seat in late 2015. 2017 saw the first signs that the school was on track for a return to its erstwhile glory days. But the scale and quantum of the improvements registered in 2018 speak to Hayes's effectiveness in galvanising her teaching staff: Nombulelo's Bachelor passes more than doubled, from 14 in 2017 to 34 in 2018.

Grahamstown in Context

The Eastern Cape Province registered a significant improvement in its pass rate, of about 6 percentage points, up to almost 71%. However, it managed this increase on the back of a further decrease in cohort size. In fact, the cohort size has dropped by over 10 000 learners over the past two years, to approximately 82 000 in 2018. As explained above, Makhanda (Grahamstown) managed both a significant increase in its local co-

hort size as well as an increase in the pass rate. Furthermore in 2018 Grahamstown produced a better pass rate than any other provincial city. (Port Elizabeth was the runner up, producing a success rate of 76%). Whilst there are still major challenges, what makes 2018 significant is that it re-established Grahamstown as the most successful educational city in the Eastern Cape. Indeed, 2018 was a most significant 'breakthrough' year for public schooling in the locality. We have outperformed the rest of the province by some margin.

The final frontier

In conclusion, it is necessary to highlight that the Grahamstown District Office of the Department of Basic Education has a responsibility to intervene with intent and impact in TEM Mrwetyana, Nathaniel Nyaluza and to a lesser extent Khutliso Daniels. These schools constitute a full one-third of local public school learners in the District. Unless the problems hampering them are effectively addressed, there is little chance that the city will emerge as a centre of educational excellence for all of its young people. But at least we can rightfully claim that, going into 2019, public education in Grahamstown is more equal now than it has ever been before.

In 2018, Makhanda (Grahamstown) produced a better pass rate than any other provincial city – including PE.

School-by-school Breakdown of results

School	2015		2016		2017		2018	
	Wrote	Passed	Wrote	Passed	Wrote	Passed	Wrote	Passed
Graeme College	54	53 (98%)	62	62 (100%)	59	58 (98%)	64	62 (97%)
Khutliso Daniels	29	7 (24%)	20	10 (50%)	32	8 (25%)	31	18 (58%)
Mary Waters	109	80 (73%)	120	85 (71%)	106	70 (66%)	62	51 (82%)
Nathaniel Nyaluza	106	24 (23%)	67	32 (48%)	53	24 (45%)	56	14 (25%)
Nombulelo	162	86 (53%)	79	45 (57%)	50	41 (82%)	127	101 (80%)
Ntsika	67	47 (70%)	70	61 (87%)	75	64 (85%)	93	79 (85%)
PJ Olivier	23	22 (96%)	38	31 (82%)	26	24 (92%)	30	25 (83%)
TEM Mrwetyana	55	22 (40%)	55	14 (26%)	21	9 (43%)	14	5 (36%)
Victoria Girls	83	83 (100%)	69	69 (100%)	82	82 (100%)	81	81 (100%)
City Total	688	424	580	409	504	380	558	436
City % Pass Rate	61.6%		70.5%		75.3%		78.1%	

School-by-school Bachelor performance

School	2015	2016	2017	2018
Graeme College	36	43	40	46
Khutliso Daniels	0	3	0	5
Mary Waters	13	13	16	19
Nathaniel Nyaluza	6	6	8	8
Nombulelo	25	7	14	34
Ntsika	11	22	22	36
PJ Olivier	13	13	17	16
TEM Mrwetyana	2	0	2	0
Victoria Girls	73	64	78	74
Total	179	171	197	238