

The mega-trend that will make or break SA education

By [Kathryn Garden](#)

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Back in 2011, the South African government published its National Development Plan (NDP), which aims to eliminate poverty and reduce inequality by 2030, using education as a cornerstone. If this happens, it said, the unemployment rate would drop to 6% by 2030.



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To achieve this, government spends relatively more on education than the US and the UK. In all, around 15% of South Africa's total budget is spent on basic education.

But the Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the single biggest trend that is preventing our education system from reaching its lofty ambitions: the growing digital divide in the country, which leaves most students unable to participate in virtual learning scenarios or to benefit from advances in education that will prepare them for life in the real world.

Forget about emerging technology trends in the education space, like artificial intelligence and augmented reality in the classroom. That's for a decade or two down the line. For South Africa in 2021, there's only one real trend in town that warrants our attention.

The need to drive equity in digital access

The NDP painted a picture of how government and service providers would draw up joint plans to roll out broadband infrastructure to schools, saying the most crucial enabler of technology would be high-speed broadband. At the same time, government's vision of digital inclusion is to ensure that no South African citizen is excluded from the benefits of a digital economy and knowledge society.

We clearly have some work to do in this regard. It's also worth noting that while technology has the potential to help our education system overcome many of its challenges, including a lack of access to learning materials, bridging the country's digital divide is not only about providing internet access.

Equity is driven by three pillars: infrastructure, broadband and devices. Only once there is consistent and sustainable equity in access to digital tools and platforms across all three pillars, can we begin to change national policy and redesign final tasks to truly redefine education.

Spark Schools' own experience during the lockdown bears out the notion that access to devices in the home is just as important as internet access. Often, smartphones, tablets and laptops are supplied by workplaces to parents, and these devices leave the home the moment a parent goes to work, leaving the students unable to access learning materials and resources. We need a broader approach.

5 things we can do to increase access in 2021

Technological innovations often outpace the ability of policymakers to innovate on related policy issues. However, there are several steps that we can take in 2021 to start laying the foundation for equity in digital access, and an education system that delivers the outcomes envisaged by the NDP.

- Set out and regulate the use of public funding for wifi infrastructure, broadband, devices and secure handling of technologies in basic and higher education.
- Expose teachers to the use of technology in their own training, and train them to use it in their teaching. Greater use of technology backed by high-speed broadband could open new opportunities not currently available for learners in disadvantaged schools.
- The Department of Basic Education should adopt the curriculum and models used by independent schools - or at the very least, investigate the idea of working together. Independent schools excel, even though they only make up about 5% of the school-population in South Africa. All of us, whether in government or independent schools, have to commit to serving as many South African children as possible.
- Drive greater coordination amongst stakeholders, including unions, government, the public, and the private sector. There is a clear need for robust public-private partnerships to ensure that all educational material is made as affordable and as accessible as possible, whether online or offline.
- Encourage a reading culture in our schools and homes. Reading and writing make up a large proportion of a student's daily timetable. If we want to achieve our educational outcomes, whether with technology or not, instruction in reading comprehension cannot begin only after a child reaches phonetic competency and fluency; it must be integrated from the outset.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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