SA COUNTS ON THE NEW SCHOOL CURRICULUM

Teachers get a five-day workshop in preparation

The new, internationally benchmarked school curriculum is on track to be implemented from next year, and teachers say they are ready to embrace the challenge. This is despite concerns as to whether all teachers are fully up to speed with the content of the new plan.

Department of education director-general Duncan Hindle says the long-awaited new curriculum will be introduced into grades 10, 11 and 12 over the next three years and is designed to "take account of the knowledge and skills required to participate in a globalising 21st-century world".

The new curriculum marks a near overhaul of the existing system, trimming down almost 100 subjects to 29.

Matriculants will have to write a minimum of seven subjects, four of which are compulsory, to be awarded a National Senior Certificate. One of two maths subjects is back on the compulsory list. Last year just 60% of matriculants wrote maths.

According to the department's deputy director-general, Penny Vinjevold, the content of some subjects has changed as much as 80%; others are unchanged.

Though teacher organisations have welcomed the new curriculum, there are still concerns about the readiness of some teachers.

"Much of the optimism comes from the fact that we desperately need a new curriculum, so we are determined to make this work," says the president of the National Professional Teachers' Organisation of SA, Dave Baly. "But I don't think we are ready; teachers are going to be under enormous pressure from next year."

The SA Democratic Teachers' Union (Sadtu) is confident its members will rise to the challenge, says Sadtu spokesman John Lewis.

Vinjevold concedes that teachers' skills will vary, but says the department has introduced an intensive training programme in which every teacher will be familiarised with the new curriculum by means of five-day workshops.

"When teachers leave the workshop, they will have a clear idea of what needs to be taught over the 32 weeks of 2006," says Vinjevold.

Of the four compulsory subjects, two will have to be official languages (up to four languages can be chosen), one must be either maths or "maths literacy", and the other a new subject called life orientation. The remaining three subjects will be optional, ranging from sciences, computer technology, geography, history, religious studies, accounting, business studies and economics to hospitality studies, tourism, design, dance, agriculture and engineering technology.

To obtain the qualification, learners will have to score a minimum of 40% in two of the three optional subjects and at least 30% in the other subjects.

According to Vinjevold, it is expected that most schools will offer between 10 and 16 of the 29 subjects, which could lead to some schools emerging as specialists in some subjects.

"It will be left to the schools to decide. But, within reason, every child should have access to all 29 subjects," he says.

But with an acute shortage of qualified maths and science teachers, there are concerns about whether teachers will be able to meet the requirements.

"Five days at a workshop is not going to produce a maths teacher," says Balt.

There has been a sharp drop in the number of qualified teachers entering the profession and some have been lured abroad.

According to a recent study by the Centre for Development Enterprise, in 2001 only 14% of schools reported that their maths and science educators had what government considers the minimum qualification (senior certificate plus 3½ years of higher education).

"Maths was always going to be a big challenge for us, which is why we will have to manage it incrementally," says Vinjevold. Initially just "core" aspects of the maths curriculum will be taught, then it will be gradually expanded, she says.

The department expects the full curriculum to be taught only in 2014. "But we have to start immediately," says Vinjevold. "We can't afford to have 40% of students leaving school without any maths literacy."

Last year the department trained 2 560 teachers in maths literacy. It plans to increase the bursary scheme for maths teachers over the next three years, as the curriculum is expanded.

Vinjevold says the new curriculum was designed to allow learners to choose subjects that prepare them for further education, including vocational training. Though the new curriculum will be introduced over three years, she says the department hopes to see the first results by 2008.

Prakash Naidoo