

## NSC EXAM 2025 CONCLUDES SMOOTHLY AMID RECORD CANDIDATE NUMBERS

The 2025 National Senior Certificate Exam (NSC) has officially come to an end after a month-long academic marathon in which more than 900 000 registered candidates nationwide participated. According to the Department of Basic Education (DBE), the examination season was completed largely without significant disruption. This success underscores the improved stability in the education system – but at the same time, it raises serious questions about learner welfare and ethical practices at certain schools.

The DBE has labelled the administration of the 2025 NSC exam a success, as a successful exam must meet the principles of fairness, integrity and security. From a national perspective, the 2025 exam is considered successful based on several criteria that protect the integrity and credibility of the process, including:

- **Administration:** Seamless administration was ensured through the timely and synchronised delivery of 199 exam papers to approximately 6 955 centres nationwide.
- **Security and Integrity:** No major paper leaks were reported. Minor incidents, such as the possession of cell phones or crib notes, were dealt with in terms of the National Policy Guidelines. An investigation has been launched in Kwa-Zulu Natal, where a teacher allegedly supplied answers to 52 candidates in advance.
- **Sufficient personnel and resources:** Although, as every year, there is a shortage of trained markers 51 104 markers have been appointed for the 2025 main marking period. The 183 marking centres were activated on 28 November 2025 – the so-called cross-over day between writing and marking.
- **High participation and minimal disruption:** Despite the country's respective social challenges, 903 561 registered candidates were able to write their exams with minimal interruption. Where local protests did cause disruption, the swift intervention of the Police ensured that candidates could proceed without delay.
- **Effective moderation and standardisation:** By 28 November 2025, 95,83% of the Marking Standardisation Meetings (MSMs) had been completed, meaning that authorised marking guidelines for 96 papers were already in place.

### A Year of Learner Welfare Concerns

Although the administration of the exams went well overall, the past month has exposed serious incidents that have brought the issue of learner welfare to the forefront. Official reports confirmed several extreme and disturbing incidents in the final weeks of the exam, which were the greatest cause for concern.

#### Traumatic incidents include:

- In Gauteng, candidates witnessed the murder of their principal shortly before the exams.
- A teacher in KwaZulu-Natal lost control of a vehicle, resulting in the injury of four candidates, one seriously.
- Two cases of rape prevented candidates from completing the exam.
- In Limpopo, candidates who spent the night in a school hall were attacked by armed robbers.

There were also a large number of cases where learners fell ill and had to write in hospital or were unable to complete the exam. The 3–4% absenteeism among candidates is significant and requires immediate and further investigation by the Department.

Particularly concerning is the ongoing challenge of principals unlawfully preventing candidates from writing certain subjects due to expected poor performance. This practice undermines the integrity of the process and is strongly

condemned. It is clear that the relentless focus on district and provincial competition directly fuels this unethical behaviour, including the encouragement of cheating by teachers in certain cases, thereby compromising the principles of fairness and integrity. It is essential that these tendencies be firmly addressed and unequivocally condemned.

The psycho-social pressure on candidates has increased dramatically. This concern is substantiated by DBE reports that report high levels of anxiety and stress among learners. Attending exhausting weekend and holiday classes has become the norm in numerous provinces. It is an undermining practice that does not necessarily produce the desired results and only drastically reduces learners' time for necessary rest and recovery. Combined with the traumatic legacy of the COVID-19 era, the result is an increase in chronic exam anxiety and stress. By the time the exam begins, a distressing number of candidates are physically exhausted and emotionally burned out.

The education system urgently needs to address three core areas to restore the integrity of the NSC process and prioritise the well-being of learners:

- **Ethical Accountability and Integrity:** There must be an immediate and non-negotiable end to the encouragement of a culture of competition around performance that encourages unethical behaviour, such as the exclusion of candidates and cheating. Stricter, transparent sanctions against principals and educators involved in misconduct are essential to protect the integrity of the exam.
- **Holistic Mental Health Programs:** The implementation of a comprehensive mental-health programme across all grades to equip learners with the necessary skills to effectively cope with the overwhelming anxiety and stress caused by the system.
- **Early Intervention and Development:** Strengthening early interventions during the formative years (0–9 years) is critical. This will ensure that academic and developmental delays are eliminated at an early stage, thereby reducing the unreasonable and desperate pressure on Grade 12 candidates to fill gaps at the last minute.

The South African Teachers' Union (SAOU) welcomes the fact that the marking period is proceeding according to plan, but emphasises the critical role that educators play in the integrity of the process. This organisation strongly encourages educators to make their skills as markers available, especially in light of the ongoing national shortage of markers.

To ensure the process, the organisation monitors marking centres across the country and maintains direct lines of communication with provincial examination directorates. Furthermore, the SAOU offers various platforms where educators can report any issues or concerns about the marking process for handling as far as possible.

With the writing now completed and the marking process in full swing, the focus temporarily shifts to the welfare of the 51,000+ educators for the 16-day marking period.

The country's matriculants will receive their final results on 13 January 2026 – the culmination of twelve years of hard work and dedication.

The most important lesson that must be taken from the 2025 exam process is the urgent need for change that places ethical integrity and learner welfare above performance. This new approach must involve three key actions: ending performance-driven malpractices, the establishment of comprehensive welfare programmes and a sustained focus on early intervention to alleviate the unreasonable burden on Grade 12 candidates.