



Promoting human rights and democracy through the media since 1993
Suite 2 Art Centre, 22, 6th Street Parkhurst Johannesburg 2193 · Tel +2711 788 1278
Email info@mma.org.za · www.mediamonitoringafrica.org · [@MediaMattersZA](https://twitter.com/MediaMattersZA)

Back-to-School 2025: An Examination of Systemic Challenges and Media Responsibility in South African Education

Every year, the return to school in South Africa signals not just the beginning of another academic journey but also renews the spotlight on the deep-seated challenges facing our education system—and, by extension, children's rights.

In 2024, with the formation of the coalition government, society's expectations for better treatment of children, especially in education, reached new heights. As the government vows to champion children's rights and secure equitable opportunities for all, the back-to-school season emerges as both a reminder and a clarion call for systemic change.

Alongside perennial issues such as inadequate transportation, crumbling infrastructure, lack of placements, new teachers, and safety, there is a growing expectation that the media will adopt a more responsible and empathetic stance in reporting on children. Journalists and news outlets are increasingly urged to go beyond mere exposés, instead highlighting narratives of resilience and progress while ensuring that every child's right to quality education is rigorously defended and every community's voice is authentically represented.

Overcrowding and classroom shortage

“Experts have warned the overcrowding could impact the literacy training of children when they reach the age of 10” – this is a quote from an article titled [“96 Grade 3 learners crammed into one class”](#) (21/01/2025) by *IOL* that highlights how Cape Town was in a scramble to resolve classroom availability in Cape Town, 96 Grade 3 learners have been crammed into a school's media centre, as circuit managers work to resolve the crisis in the face of 2 407 teachers being cut. This desperate measure comes on the heels of significant budget cuts that have seen 2,407 teachers removed from the system. As circuit managers scramble to resolve this crisis, the incident underscores the immediate challenges of classroom availability. It raises serious concerns about the long-term implications for early literacy development and the overall quality of education.

Again, an article by *IOL* titled [“KZN Education MEC urgently addresses classroom shortage as learners are forced to learn outside”](#) (22/01/2025) specifies the classroom shortages in the KZN provinces and learners are compelled to study outdoors due to insufficient classroom space. This is a makeshift solution that underscores the acute infrastructural crisis. Despite the efforts of reporting on this important issue, children's voices were not accessed.

This lack of direct engagement with affected learners means that their experiences, challenges, and needs remain largely unheard, missing an opportunity to centre their perspectives in the conversation about education reform. By amplifying children's voices, the media could play a more impactful role in advocating for urgent and meaningful solutions to these ongoing crises.

New Teachers

Despite these issues, the media has brought to light the efforts made to address the lack of teachers due to budget cuts. An article by *News24* titled "[Western Cape to hire 477 teachers for new and expanding schools - despite recent cut to 2 400 posts](#)" (15/01/2025), brings into light the employment efforts that the Western Cape will make to hire more than 470 teachers for growing schools. With plans to hire over 470 new teachers, the initiative aims not only to fill the void left by previous cuts but also to ensure that growing schools are adequately staffed to meet the educational needs of their expanding student populations. This move is a promising step toward restoring stability in the education system, signalling a commitment to investing in quality teaching despite fiscal constraints.

Safety and Transportation

Safety concerns in the transportation of learners remain at the forefront of the back-to-school period. Many articles have highlighted the accidents that occurred on the roads, with children's lives lost and some injured. The article by *IOL* titled "[Another Mpumalanga accident involving a school transport claimed 3 lives](#)" highlighted an accident involving a scholar transport that killed one learner and injured more than 20 in Mbombela Mpumalanga.

In a similar incident, *Briefly News* reported that fifteen school children sustained various injuries after a vehicle rolled over in Isithebe in KwaZulu-Natal. Despite the devastating impact of these accidents, media reports have handled the coverage responsibly by not revealing the identities of the affected children. This approach aligns with ethical reporting standards and helps protect the learners' and their families' dignity and privacy during such traumatic events.

Placements

Placements are always a burning issue at the start of every academic year, especially this year, because there were issues around the lack of teachers, especially in the Western Cape. The article by *The Daily Voice*, "[Delft school turns kids away](#)" (17/01/2025) reports about upset parents from Voorbrug in Delft claim that Delft Primary School gave them 'false hope' of enrolling their children in Grade R and now their children are forced to be at home for the year. Another similar article by *NCA* titled "[Snaking queues outside district office](#)" shows parents lined up outside district offices, desperate for the placements of their Grade R children.

Many parents were accessed, considering the children were very young, and it is commendable that the media chose not to expose their identities. This responsible reporting approach prioritises the protection and dignity of the children, ensuring their right to privacy is upheld while still shedding light on the urgent issue of school placements. This type of reporting contributed to a broader conversation about the urgent need for systemic solutions in the education sector.

Government officials School Visits

Government officials' visits to schools play a vital role in promoting education and addressing key challenges learners face. The article by *Germiston City News* titled, "[Mayor takes back-to-school campaign to Germiston school](#)" (27/01/2025) shows the kurhuleni Executive Mayor Nkosindiphile Xhakaza visited Graceland Education Centre in Germiston as part of his annual back-to-school campaign. Accompanied by MMC for Community Service Bridget Thusi, the visit aimed to monitor teaching and learning progress while strengthening ties with schools. The visit included donating school shoes to support underprivileged learners and a symbolic tree planting to celebrate the school's legacy. These initiatives underscore the importance of government involvement in education, ensuring that learners are supported and schools remain spaces of growth and opportunity.

More coverage of children being interviewed on matters concerning them like this is highly recommended. It is important that we not only hear what the teachers have to say but also what the children have to say. The amplification of their voices creates a significant inspiration to others who did not get this opportunity.

Safety Tips

Another commendable media coverage was the focus on safety tips for both parents and learners. Various publications highlighted essential precautions for school transportation, pedestrian safety, and general back-to-school readiness. These reports helped raise awareness about potential risks and provided practical guidance to ensure children's well-being. By prioritising such topics, the media played a crucial role in equipping families with the knowledge to navigate the school environment safely.

In reflecting on the media's coverage of the 2025 back-to-school period, it is evident that journalists played a crucial role in spotlighting the persistent challenges and efforts to improve the education system. The media has highlighted key issues that demand urgent attention, from overcrowding and teacher shortages to placement struggles and transport safety concerns.

However, while progress has been made in ethical reporting—such as protecting children's identities in sensitive stories—there remains room for growth in ensuring that children's voices are directly accessed and amplified in coverage that affects them. The media must continue to move beyond crisis reporting and instead adopt a solutions-oriented approach that exposes failures and champions meaningful interventions. By doing so, journalists can contribute to a more informed, engaged society that advocates for the right to quality education for all children in South Africa.

In conclusion, media coverage of back-to-school issues is essential to expose systemic challenges, drive accountability and catalyse meaningful change. When the media reports on problems such as overcrowded classrooms, teacher shortages, and unsafe transportation, it sparks necessary public debate and pressures the government and stakeholders to take decisive action. Equally important is the need to include children's voices in these stories.

In addition, by directly accessing and amplifying the experiences and insights of those most affected, i.e. children, the media can humanise abstract statistics and bring a deeper understanding of the real-life impact of these challenges. Incorporating children's perspectives empowers young learners and ensures that the realities inform policy decisions on the ground. Ultimately, a responsible, inclusive approach to journalism is key to fostering an education system that upholds every child's right to quality education.

Media Monitoring Africa (MMA) is dedicated to advancing children's rights in the media and goes above and beyond to ensure that children's stories are presented delicately and respectfully. Through programs like Web Rangers and MADOAT, MMA empowers young people to navigate the online world safely while advocating for responsible digital citizenship. Additionally, through research, advocacy, and capacity building, MMA empowers journalists to accurately and ethically report on children's issues, fostering a media landscape that prioritises the well-being and rights of young individuals.

Written by Siphokazi Pikoko

Edited by Ntombifuthi Kubeka

