What’s the issue?

South Africa has made impressive progress in improving access to education, with upper-secondary enrolment having increased by 35% since 2000. But persistent inequities and poor education quality lead to low education outcomes.

South Africa needs to improve the quality of primary and secondary schooling to ensure that all students achieve the skills needed for further education, work and life.

Strengthening the equity, efficiency and effectiveness in resource use will be vital to addressing South Africa’s large social and educational inequalities and meeting the aspirations of a burgeoning youth population.

Stakeholders across government and industry must work together to strengthen the labour-market relevance of education, including vocational education and training, and improve the school-to-work transition, particularly for disadvantaged youth.

Despite significant improvement, gaps in educational attainment between different population groups remain large

Mean years of schooling at age 27

fails to provide alternative pathways to further education or employment. With low quality, low status and low labour market relevance, the system is ill-prepared to address the needs of the country’s burgeoning youth population.

The government recognizes these challenges. The National Development Plan 2030 provides a bold vision for education reform and rightly concentrates on the need to improve learning outcomes through robust assessment, better quality teaching, and increased access to ECEC. Efforts to reduce inequalities will require a carefully targeted approach and much smarter use of resources. While overall spending is high, population pressures mean that per pupil expenditure in South Africa is well below that of other G20 economies. Redistribution reforms will need to go hand in hand with greater effectiveness and efficiency if the country is to expand access while raising performance standards. The 2014 OECD Skills Beyond School Review of South Africa offers recommendations on how South Africa can meet its ambitious target of achieving 2.5 million enrolments in VET colleges by 2030. The review places strong emphasis on the role work-based learning can play in building a stronger bridge between education and the world of work.

Why is this important for South Africa?

Ensuring that all children complete school with the skills needed for further education, work and life is essential to enhancing South Africa’s competitiveness and encouraging higher value-added production. The OECD estimates that South Africa’s annual GDP growth would be 1.65% higher if all students currently in school were to achieve basic skills. Higher skill levels can also bring important social benefits, in terms of better health, greater trust and more positive engagement in political processes. Getting more children from poor families into education at an early age, as well as ensuring they receive the same quality of teaching and learning infrastructure as children from wealthy communities, would be one of the most effective strategies for addressing inequality in South Africa and breaking the cycle of poverty.

The risks of inaction are equally high. South Africa has one of the lowest tertiary enrolment rates among G20 countries. At just 6%, it is insufficient to give South Africa the innovation capital it needs to reach high income status. Within Africa, South African students are already outperformed on regional tests by those in many smaller neighbouring economies. While other emerging economies have expanded access to education, South Africa has struggled to keep up with demographic trends in recent years and the number of out-of-school children has increased. This is not only a waste of human talent, but threatens social cohesion and democracy.