



Teachers build nations

Every year on 5 October the world pauses to honour the people who stand at the centre of human development. World Teachers' Day, proclaimed by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (Unesco) in 1994, commemorates the adoption of the 1966 ILO/Unesco Recommendation concerning the Status of Teachers - the foundational international instrument that affirms teachers' rights, professional standards, fair working conditions, and continuous professional development. In 2026, the 60th anniversary of that Recommendation is marked under the global theme "Standing with teachers: 60 years of protecting the profession, advancing its status, and shaping our futures."

For the PSA, this day is more than ceremonial. It is an occasion to reaffirm that teachers are public servants of the highest order - guardians of knowledge, architects of citizenship, and indispensable partners in the realisation of South Africa's constitutional and developmental aspirations. Teaching remains the profession that makes every other profession possible. Doctors, engineers, public administrators, scientists, entrepreneurs, and community leaders all begin their journeys in classrooms guided by teachers.

Yet, the same profession that carries this national responsibility continues to labour under conditions that undermine its status and effectiveness. Unesco's Global Report on Teachers estimates that the world will require 44 million additional primary and secondary teachers by 2030 to achieve universal education. Sub-Saharan Africa alone faces a projected shortfall of approximately 15 million teachers. South Africa is not insulated from this crisis. Investing in the recruitment, retention, professional development, and well-being of teachers is therefore a moral imperative and a strategic national priority.

This paper celebrates the contribution of South African teachers, situates their work in the broader project of nation-building, examines the structural challenges that confront them, and advances a clear set of advocacy priorities that the PSA places before government and society on behalf of the Union's educator members.

Teachers, history, and National Development Project

In South Africa, the significance of World Teachers' Day carries particular historical weight. During the apartheid years many educators worked under severe constraints - resource starvation, ideological control of the curriculum, and the constant risk of state repression – yet continued to open minds and sustain hope. The 1976 Soweto Uprising underscored the centrality of education to the struggle for freedom and equality. Teachers and students together helped shape the democratic future that followed.

Today, teachers remain indispensable partners in the implementation of the National Development Plan 2030. Education is identified as a critical lever for reducing poverty and inequality, expanding opportunity, and building an inclusive economy. The Department of Basic Education employs more than 400 000 educators who serve over 13 million learners in public schools.

National learner-educator ratios average approximately 30:1, yet many township and rural schools continue to operate with significantly larger classes, limiting individualised support and intensifying workload.

Teachers do far more than deliver content. They identify learners who require additional academic and psychosocial support, cultivate critical thinking and discipline, and model the constitutional values of equality, inclusion, citizenship, and respect for diversity. In an economy being reshaped by technological change and artificial intelligence, they are charged with equipping young people with problem-solving, collaboration, creativity, and digital competencies. As Unesco has repeatedly emphasised, technology can enhance learning only when it is guided by skilled, motivated, and well-supported teachers.

Challenges confronting South African teachers

Quality education cannot be delivered by educators whose own conditions of service, safety, and well-being are systematically neglected. The PSA draws attention to several interlocking challenges that demand urgent attention.

Overcrowding and Resource Inequality

Despite the national target of a 30:1 learner-educator ratio, many schools - particularly in historically disadvantaged communities - operate with substantially larger classes. Overcrowding constrains individualised attention, complicates classroom management, and reduces the time available for learners who need extra support. Parallel shortages of textbooks, laboratories, libraries, reliable internet connectivity, and basic sanitary facilities continue to undermine the delivery of a common curriculum. Infrastructure backlogs and unequal resource allocation remain amongst the most stubborn obstacles to educational equity.

Administrative burden and workload

Educators report that administrative and compliance tasks consume time that should be devoted to preparation, teaching, and learner support. Recent surveys consistently identify excessive grading, responsibility for learner outcomes, and administrative duties as primary sources of occupational stress. The OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) 2024 found that 30% of South African teachers reported feeling “a lot” stressed at work - well above the OECD average of 19% - while 17% indicated that their job had adversely affected their mental health “a lot.” Subsequent union and independent research has shown that more than nine in ten educators identify high workload and burnout as major workplace challenges, with administrative burden ranking as the second most frequently cited concern.

Safety, violence, and occupational risk

Schools are not always safe workplaces. Incidents of learner-on-teacher violence, intimidation, and broader community insecurity have risen in several provinces. Educators who experience physical or verbal assault often face inadequate institutional support, delayed or absent trauma counselling, and uncertainty about coverage under occupational injury legislation. The PSA regards any attack on a teacher as an attack on the public service itself and insists that school safety, psychosocial support, and appropriate legislative protection must form part of the core conditions of service.

Digital Transformation and the Fourth Industrial Revolution

The introduction of coding, robotics, and digital learning frameworks is a necessary response to the demands of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Yet many schools - especially in rural and township areas - lack sufficient devices, connectivity, and technical support. Without concurrent investment in teacher professional development and equitable digital infrastructure, technology risks widening rather than narrowing learning gaps. Research by Fleisch (2019) and Taylor (2019) confirms that sustained improvement in learner outcomes depends primarily on strengthening teachers’ content knowledge and instructional practice. Technology is an amplifier of good teaching, not a substitute for it.

Teacher supply, vacancies, and retention

Thousands of funded teaching posts remain vacant. High attrition, driven by workload, stress, safety concerns, and limited career progression, threatens the stability of the system. Studies indicate that a substantial proportion of educators are considering leaving the profession within the next decade. Special-school teachers, in particular, perform extensive care and support work that is seldom counted in formal workload models, placing them under additional strain.

PSA agenda: Standing with educator members

As the voice of public servants, the PSA advances the following priorities on behalf of teachers and education workers. These demands flow directly from the 1966 Recommendation, the National Development Plan, and the lived experience of members.

- **Fill critical vacancies and stabilise the workforce.** Immediate appointment of qualified educators into vacant funded posts, conversion of long-term contract staff to permanent employment, and improved post-provisioning norms that reflect actual learner needs, including the intensive support required in special schools.
- **Reduce non-teaching workload.** Streamline administrative and compliance requirements, expand administrative support capacity at school level, and protect instructional time so that teachers can focus on teaching and learning.
- **Guarantee safe and dignified workplaces.** Robust school safety protocols, deployment of trained security where required, zero-tolerance enforcement against violence and intimidation, and explicit inclusion of classroom assaults under occupational injury and disease legislation with accessible trauma support.
- **Invest in professional development and digital readiness.** Sustained, high-quality continuing professional development that equips teachers for curriculum change, inclusive education and digital pedagogy, accompanied by equitable provision of devices, connectivity, and technical support.
- **Protect educator well-being.** Accessible, confidential psychosocial services, recognition of burnout as an occupational health issue, and workplace cultures that value recovery and mutual support rather than merely distribute wellness pamphlets.
- **Advance fair remuneration and career progression.** Competitive conditions of service that attract and retain talent, transparent and accessible career pathways, and recognition of the full scope of teachers' professional and care work.
- **Strengthen collective voice and social dialogue.** Meaningful teacher participation in policy development, curriculum reform and school governance, consistent with the status of teaching as a profession and with the principles of the 1966 Recommendation.

Teachers are at the core of South Africa's education system and amongst the most consequential public servants in the Country. Their daily labour shapes the cognitive, social, and ethical formation of future generations and, by extension, the quality of South Africa's democracy and economy. Recognition on World Teachers' Day must therefore translate into sustained policy choices: Manageable workloads, safe schools, adequate resources, continuous professional growth, and conditions of service that affirm the dignity of the profession.

The PSA reaffirms the Union's commitment to stand with educator members - advocating for the structural investments and workplace protections that enable them to teach effectively. Investing in teachers is not an optional expenditure. It is the most direct investment in South Africa's human capital, social cohesion, and long-term prosperity. On World Teachers' Day, and every day that follows, the PSA calls on government, employers, communities, and society at large to protect the profession, advance its status, and thereby shape a future worthy of the learners who entrust their potential to South Africa's teachers.

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- Additional contemporary sources on workload, safety and vacancies include reports by SAOU, SADTU and parliamentary budget data (2025–2026).