

SOUTH AFRICA: 'Alarm' at South African Pupils' Lack of HIV/AIDS Knowledge

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A new study finds that two-thirds of South African sixth- graders lack basic knowledge about HIV/AIDS.

"The results [indicate] that major alarm bells should be ringing in South Africa [because] knowledge levels about HIV and AIDS among around two-thirds of grade six learners in 2007 were below a benchmark defined as mastery of more than one- half the official school curriculum," wrote study authors Meshack Moloi and Mark Chetty. The findings are from the latest Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality report, which is based on research in 15 nations in 2007.

Socioeconomic status greatly affected HIV/AIDS awareness: 17 percent of lower-income students had basic knowledge levels versus 65 percent of their wealthier peers. Large provincial variations were seen as well, with Gauteng scoring high and Limpopo low in student awareness of the virus. "Before 2008 [Limpopo] did not have someone assigned to specifically deal with HIV-awareness programs in schools, but now we have a person to do that," said provincial education department spokesperson Pat Kgomo.

South Africa's education leaders point to a dedicated HIV/AIDS awareness budget and expanded programming since 2007. "Recently the Department of Health has approached us on their voluntary testing model which we are currently in discussion to assist in addressing [HIV awareness levels]," said Department of Education spokesperson Panyaza Lesufi.

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