

The Annual National Assessments (ANA): What is at stake?

[Introduction](#)

[The ANAs](#)

[Union Responses](#)

[Drivers of the Conflict](#)

[Union Militancy](#)

[Burden on Resources](#)

[Lack of Useful Information](#)

[Data Availability](#)

[Compatibility](#)

[Responses and Interventions](#)

[International Experiences](#)

[Recommendations](#)

[Should Unions Support the ANAs?](#)

[Should Unions Support standardized assessments?](#)

[How should unions engage on ANAs?](#)

[What does the ANA debate mean for union relations?](#)

[Conclusion](#)

Introduction

On the 21st of September, every major South African teachers union issued a rare joint statement on the Annual National Assessments (ANAs). Claiming that the tests have “no value to the South African Learner”, the unions announced they would refuse to administer them. Originally scheduled for 1 – 4 December 2015, the Department of Basic Education was forced to delay the assessments until February 2016 (with even this date contested by unions).

It is easy to dismiss the conflict over the ANAs as business-as-usual in the difficult relationship between teachers unions and the Department of Basic Education. But this case seems different. The showdown over the 2015 ANAs has been building since the introduction of the tests in 2011, with the assessments receiving a broad range of critiques from a wide variety of stakeholders. Actors that would normally be expected to be in conflict with the unions - such as the DA and NGO Equal Education - have similarly added their voice to the criticism of the assessments. The general consensus is that there is something wrong with the ANAs.

Reaction has, however, been more divided in other areas. While everyone agrees there are problems with the ANAs, many still maintain that standardised assessments are essential to identifying problem areas in a deeply troubled education system. And commentators have been mixed on the union's decision to boycott the tests.

The assessments are without doubt flawed and in need of debate, but proceeding to challenge them will require careful analysis of the tests, and a delicate balancing act between protecting students, teachers, and union-government relationships - and constructing new tools to tackle the education crisis.

The ANAs

The Annual National Assessments were introduced in 2011, after a two year trial period. The assessments test for literacy and mathematics, and target primary school learners at early stages (testing at grade 1-3) and foundational stages (testing at grade 4-6), as well as early high school learners (testing at grade 9). The tests are administered across virtually the entire school system, and are a massive logistical undertaking, with the 2015 tests scheduled to assess 8.6 million students.

The ANAs have four stated aims.¹

1. (Providing) Examples of assessment standards and methods.
2. Better targeted district support.
3. Evaluation of school performance.
4. Provide School Governing Bodies and parents with information.

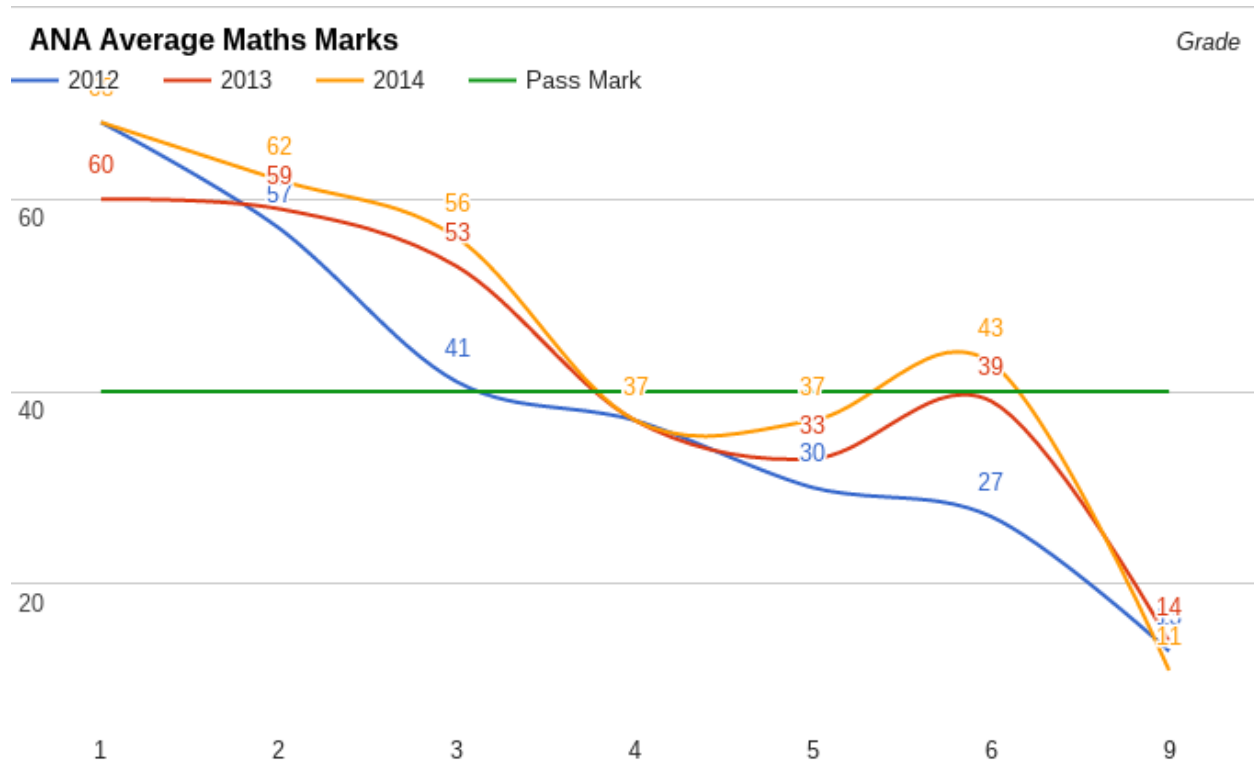
The tests take place within the context of an education system in crisis. South African learners are amongst the worst performing globally, with particularly poor results in science and mathematics. The education system is deeply unequal, with extremely expensive but well resourced private schools, sitting alongside desperately poor public schools in rural and township areas. Learners from poorer backgrounds face incredible challenges to overcome the restraints of the school system.

The government has spent an impressive amount on the schooling system, devoting 19.2% of state spending to education, more than double the spending rate in Japan and only slightly behind the 20% spent by top education performer Singapore.² But results have remained poor. Frequent policy and curriculum changes have created a great deal of uncertainty amongst both learners and teachers, while more ambitious (and controversial) reforms have run up against resistance from teachers unions. Social educational support - parents and family members who can help struggling learners overcome problems at school - is particularly weak in South Africa, because a generation of parents were themselves denied access to education opportunities during Apartheid.

¹ Herholdt, R. & Henning, E. 2014. "How teachers use the Annual National Assessment data: Lessons for the future." Presentation to the South African Research Association for Early Childhood Education Conference, 2014.

² World Bank. 2014. "Expenditure on education as % of total government expenditure (%)." *World Development Indicators*. Washington, DC: World Bank.

Initial rounds of the ANAs have demonstrated the depth of the education crisis, as can be seen in the maths results from 2012-2014 in Figure 1.³ In 2014, the national average maths mark amongst Grade 9 learners was a truly dismal 10.8%.



The ANAs are supposed to provide policymakers with better understanding of the problems they face, and offer more information on how to respond to these problems. They are meant to be the diagnostic tool that tells education professionals what changes need to be made, where they need to be made, and whether those changes are succeeding.

Union Responses

Unions have always had an uneasy relationship with evaluation systems. Many of these are associated with the apartheid-era education system, when the state used rigorous surveillance of teachers as a way to advance conformity with bantu education and suppress resistance. The foundational protest action of teachers unions, led by SADTU during the transition between 1989-1994, lobbied for numerous changes, key amongst them being the end of intrusive school evaluation. Defiance campaigns in 1990 and 1991 specifically targeted school inspection and surveillance, and largely broke the system of bureaucratic authority put in place by the old government's Department of Basic Education.⁴

³ Department of Basic Education. 4 December 2014. "Report on the Annual National Assessments of 2014." Pretoria: DoBE

⁴ Glaser, C. "Champions of the poor or 'militant fighters for a better pay cheque'? Teacher unionism in Mexico and South Africa, 1979-2013." University of the Witwatersrand.

Informed by this experience, teachers unions have long been sceptical of the ANAs. Many of their complaints are discussed below, but they include: the increased workload of having to learn and teach the ANA curriculum, concerns that tests will be used to evaluate teacher performance, and the inappropriate nature of information provided by the tests (which rarely helps teachers improve their performance).

The current boycott of the ANAs is a joint effort between every major teachers union in the country, including: the Southern African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU), National Professional Teachers Organisations of South Africa (Naptosa), the South African Teachers Union, the National Teachers' Union, and the Professional Educators Union. While all refused to administer the test, the unions are not publically opposed to the tests in principle, but rather oppose the tests in their current form. Unions are working as part of a task team to rework the assessments, and claim that once a new model is found, they will administer the test.

Drivers of the Conflict

There are two contrasting explanations for the conflict. To some, the boycott is evidence of the typical approach of teachers unions, which have a history of militant opposition to changes in the education system. To others, the real cause is deep problems with the tests themselves.

Union Militancy

It is easy to dismiss the conflict over the ANAs as business as usual for teachers unions, which are often criticised as being militantly resistant to any number of Departmental initiatives, and as being stumbling blocks to vitally needed reform of the education system.

In reality, the education sector has been relatively free of industrial action for long periods, with no strikers occurring between 1994 and 2006.⁵ This was, however, largely because SADTU, through its membership of tripartite alliance partner COSATU, has a particularly close relationship with government, and was often able to direct policy away from the types of interventions that might have provoked a strike.

This period of calm began to deteriorate under the Mbeki administration, during which efforts were made to strengthen the Department of Education and Training and expand control over teachers. There was massive resistance to new efforts to build teacher surveillance and monitoring systems, which members remained wary of after their experiences of monitoring under the apartheid government's. Efforts to implement 'Whole School Assessments', a system of week-long evaluation in schools, were effectively blocked by SADTU. The period of relative calm ended in 2007, as SADTU joined a bitter public sector strike, and later was a vocal and powerful player in internal ANC politics, supporting the recall of President Mbeki at Polokwane.

The history of union resistance to monitoring and evaluation systems, and the low trust levels between teachers and the Department of Basic Education, are understandable potential causes of the current conflict.

⁵ Ibid.

But there are some immediate indicators that this explanation is inadequate. Most notable is the unity between the unions. Teachers unions are fractured and almost always hold different opinions. The unified stance on the ANAs is extremely rare, and indicative that this is not a usual conflict. Unions have, in this case, supported evaluation, and pledged to work towards revising the system of ANAs, a rare show of support for monitoring and evaluation systems. Stakeholders that would normally take up typical positions opposing the union's, such as the DA⁶ and Equal Education⁷, have shown some level of support for the protests.

The ANAs themselves are arguably deeply flawed, with five key problems.

Misallocation of Resources

First, the tests risk encouraging a poor distribution of time by teachers. Because schools performance will be judged by the ANAs, teachers are under immense pressure to make sure their learners perform. Because of this pressure, teachers often tend to focus their lessons on preparing students for the ANAs, rather than focusing on the core curriculum. This teaching is neither productive nor does it properly prepare students for the core curriculum tests that will actually determine their future. ANA instruction mostly involves teaching students to grapple with a certain testing method, a time consuming process that does not stimulate crucial critical thinking skills.

Aside from teaching time, the ANAs also come as a financial cost to the DoBE. Sadtu deputy secretary Bheki Shandu claims the ANAs cost the department R300 million, resources that almost surely could have been reassigned to more critical aspects of an education system in crisis.

In a country in which 50%-60% of students will fail to reach matric⁸, and only 25.4% of the remainder qualified for university in 2015, the cost and time spent preparing for the ANAs is arguably far too high.

Lack of Useful Information

Second, the tests do not offer enough information on how to make interventions in the education system. Partly, this is because of the lessons mentioned above: because so much is riding on the tests, teachers are pressured to focus on test preparation, which generates results that do not reflect the reality of the curriculum knowledge.

⁶ Democratic Alliance. "SADTU is right: Annual National Assessments aren't working." Oct 6, 2015. <https://www.da.org.za/2014/10/sadtu-right-annual-national-assessments-arent-working/>

⁷ Equal Education, "Major reforms needed on ANAs". PoliticsWeb, 16 Sep 2015.

<http://www.politicsweb.co.za/politics/major-reforms-needed-on-anas--equal-education>

⁸ AfricaCheck. "South Africa's matric pass rate obscures dropout rate".

https://africacheck.org/spot_check/south-africas-matric-pass-rate-obscures-dropout-rate/#sthash.VZfdYjIZ.dpuf

More importantly, however, is what the tests assess. Professor Ruksana Osman, dean of humanities at the University of the Witwatersrand, put it simply as: “Our research shows that early grade ANAs assess for the wrong things.”⁹

In particular, the ANA’s do not offer guidance on the level of understanding of students, but rather focuses on broad trends in right/wrong answers. For example, the 2014 ANA for Grade 9 Mathematics shows students scoring a truly astoundingly poor average of 10.8%.¹⁰ But while that number seems to scream out for immediate intervention, it provides little information on how to improve results. The take-away from that result is that students are failing to comprehend in every area, but that doesn’t suggest how to intervene, or what level of understanding should serve as a base for teacher’s intervention. A teacher presented with ANA results is supposed to know more about how to teach their students, but it’s not clear that is the case.

Data Availability

Third, while the assessments provide some further information for policymakers, it is not clear that this is needed. Data is already available on the performance of different schools and areas, based on the actual core testing curriculum, not on a different bespoke test. ANA data is more reliable, as the tests are standardized, but it’s not clear that the department is really learning things they didn’t know before: many of the same schools and districts that struggle with the curriculum, struggle with the ANAs.

More pressingly – teachers should be individually best placed to judge their performance of their students, particularly with continuous assessment practises that are now an integrated part of the curriculum. Arguably, if a teacher cannot respond to the performance of a student that they engage with five days a week, they will not be able to respond to the results of an abstract set of statistical data created by a centrally run test.

Consistency

Fourth, the tests are arguably not comparable across years and grades. It is essential that tests from various years can be compared, to allow the data from the ANAs to provide some understanding on how results are changing. But the ANA testing structure has changed almost every year since it was introduced. Often, areas with very low marks will get easier tests the following year, creating a misleading picture of the actual changes in the education system.

This criticism is slightly more contested. Having ANAs that are too similar can also be damaging to their usefulness. Some teaching professionals argue that tests must change over time, to assure that students don’t know what’s going to come up. While most agree the first few ANAs

⁹ Nicolson, G. “Annual national assessments: a Challenging Tests.” Daily Maverick, 23 Sep 2015. <http://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2015-09-23-annual-national-assessments-a-challenging-test/#.VLlog03UjIU>

¹⁰ Motshekga, A. 2015. “Release of Annual National Assessments results 2014”. Department of Basic Education. <http://www.gov.za/speech-minister-basic-education-mrs-angie-motshekga-mp-official-release-annual-national-assessments>

changed too much, this was partly to be expected for a new test, which is still finding its feet and working out all the kinks.

Responses and Interventions

Fifth, it is not clear what the response to poor results will be. Assessments are only as effective as the responses they create, and it is not clear that responses are in place for the ANAs, or if they are even really possible. When grade 9 learners posted terrible maths results in 2014, the response was to commission a study on what is wrong – effectively the response to an assessment was more assessment.

Even if the Department of Education was poised to target and respond to problem areas, in most cases there is little they can do. The problems are serious and systematic. If schools do not have adequately skilled teachers, then assessing that teaching is a problem won't make more teachers appear. Yes, it is useful to have data to guide interventions. But most interventions are relatively obvious at this point, and data can only help fine-tune responses.

International Experiences

The debates around assessments like the ANAs are not limited to South Africa, indeed many of the issues behind the tests are central debates in education policy across the world. The core issue is how to evaluate school and teacher performance, and what to do in response to these evaluations. This debate has been raging for years, without clear answers, most notably in the United States.

In 2001 President George W Bush introduced No Child Left Behind, an education initiative that introduced standardised assessments for grades 3 to 8, and a common set of targets known as "Adequate Yearly Progress" (or AYP). AYPs mandated annual improvements in performance of each grade of learners, and failure to meet the AYP standards would result in progressively more serious interventions. After two-years of failure schools had to draft an improvement plan, after three years the school had to provide free supplementary education to students, onward to six years: after which schools would be subject to restructuring or closure.

Supporters argued that the policy forced local government to concentrate on improving schools, and assured that even schools in low income areas were held to high standards. Critics argued that the standards put an impossible burden on schools facing serious structural problems: forcing teachers in low-income, poorly-resourced schools to produce similar results to the best-resourced schools in the country. While some of the sanctions resulted in dramatic improvements in the schools, others simply piled more pressure on the most vulnerable schools. For those schools, the requirements of the law made life even more difficult, pitching the schools into a downward spiral of worse grades with each new requirement.

While these exact issues aren't the same in terms of the ANA, they share common threads. Namely: how to understand performance and fix struggling schools - and how to navigate union resistance.

The United States faced huge battles with unions to push through deeper testing. Despite the limited union protections in the US, 3000 Florida teachers marched against assessments¹¹, teachers in Seattle succeeded in the doing away with standardized tests¹², while New York state only passed assessments after a series of interventions from the state government.¹³ Similar battles have raged in other countries. Mexico City was shut down in 2013, as teachers unions blocked highways, burnt cars, and blockaded the entrance to Congress - in protest of proposed teacher assessment systems, as part of a raft of broader education reforms.¹⁴ In Malaysia, where strikes amongst the civil service are rare, teachers took to the streets after three years of similar assessments.¹⁵ A list of European countries, including Portugal¹⁶ and Ireland¹⁷, faced similar protests over assessments and assessment methodologies.

It is important to remember that, while South Africa's education system has many unique challenges, protests over teacher assessment are not one of them.

Recommendations

There are four big questions that must be answered as we proceed forward:

1. Should unions support ANAs?
2. Should unions support some form of assessment?
3. How should unions engage on ANAs?
4. How does this affect union's broader engagement on education?

Should Unions Support the ANAs?

First, should union's support ANAs in their current form? On the evidence, it seems there is good reason for them not to. The ANAs seem to offer little useful input, but come at very real costs, tying up financial and teaching resources that could be better used to support teaching of

¹¹ Strauss, V. "‘Enough is enough’ — thousands of Florida teachers protest". Washington Post, 15 Jan, 2015. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2016/01/15/enough-is-enough-thousands-of-florida-teachers-protest/>

¹² "Seattle Teachers, Students Win Historic Victory Over Standardized Testing." Democracy Now, May 20, 2013. http://www.democracynow.org/2013/5/20/seattle_teachers_students_win_historic_victory

¹³ Ravitch, D. "Holding Education Hostage." The New York Review of Books, 1 Feb, 2013. <http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2013/02/01/holding-education-hostage/>

¹⁴ Glaser, C. "Champions of the poor or 'militant fighters for a better pay cheque'? Teacher unionism in Mexico and South Africa, 1979-2013." University of the Witwatersrand.

¹⁵ Mahavera, S. "Teachers to hold protest against school-based assessment." The Malaysian Insider, 5 Feb, 2015. <http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/teachers-to-hold-protest-against-school-based-assessment>

¹⁶ Campos Lima, M. "Teachers protest against career and assessment system." EurWork, 29 April, 2009. <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/observatories/eurwork/articles/teachers-protest-against-career-and-assessment-system>

¹⁷ Flaherty, R. "Thousands of teachers protest over Junior Cycle reform". The Irish Times, May 7, 2015. <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/education/thousands-of-teachers-protest-over-junior-cycle-reform-1.2204098>

the core curriculum. The more difficult question here is whether the flawed ANAs should be supported as a means to build towards more useful tests in the future.

While it would be great if all flaws in government policy could be corrected before that policy is applied, in reality policy only becomes effective through trial and error. Policy-making is a process of learning by doing, and arguably the ANAs must be rolled out in their broken form in order to build towards a working system.

While that argument is true for most policies, it does not seem to hold firmly in this case. Assessments are only useful to the extent to which they can be used to compare between years. If the ANA for 2017 is completely different to the ANA for 2015, then the results from the current round of testing is of limited use. Government, in close cooperation with unions and parents, must come to some kind of agreement on a working test model before implementing it.

Should Unions Support standardized assessments?

This line of reasoning is, however, contingent on a second question: should teachers support some form of standardized assessment?

There are some legitimate concerns. Regardless of how assessments are managed, they are likely to put pressure on teachers, and to tie up some teaching resources. It does not seem overly likely that they will provide truly game-changing insights, beyond what we already know about the fundamental systemic problems in the education system. And they are not essential to building a functioning education system, as leading critic of evaluation systems, Diane Ravitch, notes “none of the world’s highest-performing nations—such as Finland, Japan, China, Korea, Canada, Poland, Estonia, and Singapore—tests every child every year.”

Despite this, assessments can be done in a way that is good for teachers, and good for the education system. Calls by unions for greater support for teachers too often come up against accusations that teachers are lazy or unions are being difficult. Assessments can be a way to prove these critics wrong. An assessment system that does not blame teachers or school leaders, but rather is used to recognise the challenges that they face, can help direct resources to those teachers who need it most.

Teachers unions and the Department of Basic Education needs to work together to make sure that assessments are understood in this way. The Department will need to offer assurances that testing scores won’t be used to punish struggling teachers. This would be good politics, but it’s also more factually accurate: the American Statistical Association calculates that “teachers account for about 1% to 14% of the variability in test scores”, with poor scores more directly attributed to the broader environment facing students.¹⁸

¹⁸ Ravitch, D. “Making Schools Poor.” The New York Review of Books, 13 June, 2014.
<http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2014/06/13/making-schools-poorer/>

How should unions engage on ANAs?

This largely fits with union's current positions, in which they opposed the ANAs but support efforts to work towards an alternate form of testing. This offers a very challenging predicament. Developing a revised system will take time. However, if teachers maintain their boycott until this process is completed, then there will be large gaps in the ANA results. A missing year or two is bad in itself, but it also undermines the usefulness of previous rounds of testing. And, crucially, it would further undermine trust between unions and the department of education; trust that is essential to collaborating to build a new system to replace the ANAs.

A compromise might be possible in the form of reducing rounds of tests in the short-term to selected samples. While testing the whole system provides more rigorous results, testing a select group of schools and then adjusting the results using statistical analysis can provide almost as much information about broad performance trends. Sampling can be done at a lower cost, with less burden on teachers, and on a rotation basis, so that each school would only be tested every so many years. Sampling is already used in the ANAs, in order to provide some oversight by independent evaluators, and many education professionals put more stock in the independent sample than the core results. While this might not be a permanent answer, it would be a compromise that keeps the system turning over until a more comprehensive solution can be found.

What does the ANA debate mean for union relations?

A more challenging question is what the aftermath of the ANA showdown will mean for unions. The ANAs are seemingly held in very high regard by Education Minister Angie Motshekga, and are one of the department leadership's most cherished initiatives. This particular fight, even if based on legitimate concerns, is likely to harm relations between the minister and her department, and the teachers unions. That one of the Minister's landmark efforts has been slammed in such a manner will be a source of strain.

While unions must stand up for their members and the needs of the education system, union action is always a matter of political negotiation: there must be give and take. Too often the education system has been defined by both sides trying to take, with neither willing to compromise. This status quo can't go on, and the ANA debate is a good moment to start thinking of ways to make changes.

Conclusion

The ANAs are important, and the conflict over them is a headline story. Unions and the Department of Basic Education must work hard to find a solution.

But the ANAs also need to be kept in perspective.

Assessments seem to make sense generally. In a normal, functioning education system, they are useful indication of where problems are and where resources need to be directed. But South Africa is not a normal functioning education system. The basic problems are so serious as to demand more generalised interventions. ANAs are important, but they most certainly are not as

important as rebuilding the teacher training system, providing expanded support and training for current teachers, providing learners with adequate textbooks and resources, providing parents with advice on how to support learners, or assuring teachers make enough to attract talented graduates to the profession – and that's before considering more radical solutions like extending the length of the school day or replicating the system of foreign teacher recruitment that has proved so successful in East Asia.

Government departments have a natural bias towards tests and reports: they create nice little press statements that seem to promise deep insight. But the demands of fixing education in South Africa are too great for reports and platitudes. The ANAs should be fixed, but it must be remembered that they are a small part of the big changes that we need.