

Press Release

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South African Institute of Race Relations
The power of ideas

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Single-medium schools losing hold on African languages

Public single-medium African language schools have declined since 2008, from 7.2% of all single-medium schools to 4.6% in 2012. This is according to the latest *South Africa Survey*, published by the South African Institute of Race Relations (IRR).

The *Survey* is the annual yearbook on all social, economic, and political aspects of South Africa that the IRR has been publishing since 1946.

An analysis based on an answer by the minister of basic education to a parliamentary question reveals that of all the official African languages used as media of instruction in single-medium schools, only Xhosa saw an increase in the number of such schools from 278 in 2008 to 317 in 2012, or by 14%. Despite this growth, Xhosa single-medium schools accounted for only 3% of all such schools in 2012. Single-medium schools use one language of instruction for all pupils in all grades, and account for 44% of all public schools.

The second most used African language in public single-medium schools is Zulu, although between 2008 and 2012, the number of Zulu single-medium schools declined from 188 to 85, or by 55%. Zulu single-medium schools accounted for less than one percent (0.8%) of all single-medium schools in 2012.

English is most widely used in public single-medium schools, accounting for 81% of all such schools in 2012. However, English single-medium schools grew from 8 522 to 8 721 between 2008 and 2012, that is, by only 2%. The decline in the number of African language single-medium schools can be attributed to the fact that the majority of these schools become either dual-or parallel-medium, typically combining with English.

Thuthukani Ndebele, a researcher at the IRR, said, 'Most pupils learn in an African language at foundation phase, but switch to either English or Afrikaans from as early as Grade 4'.

'The decline in the use of African languages in schools is evidently not a choice made at tertiary level, but is exercised by parents and pupils at the early schooling stages', Mr Ndebele said.

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